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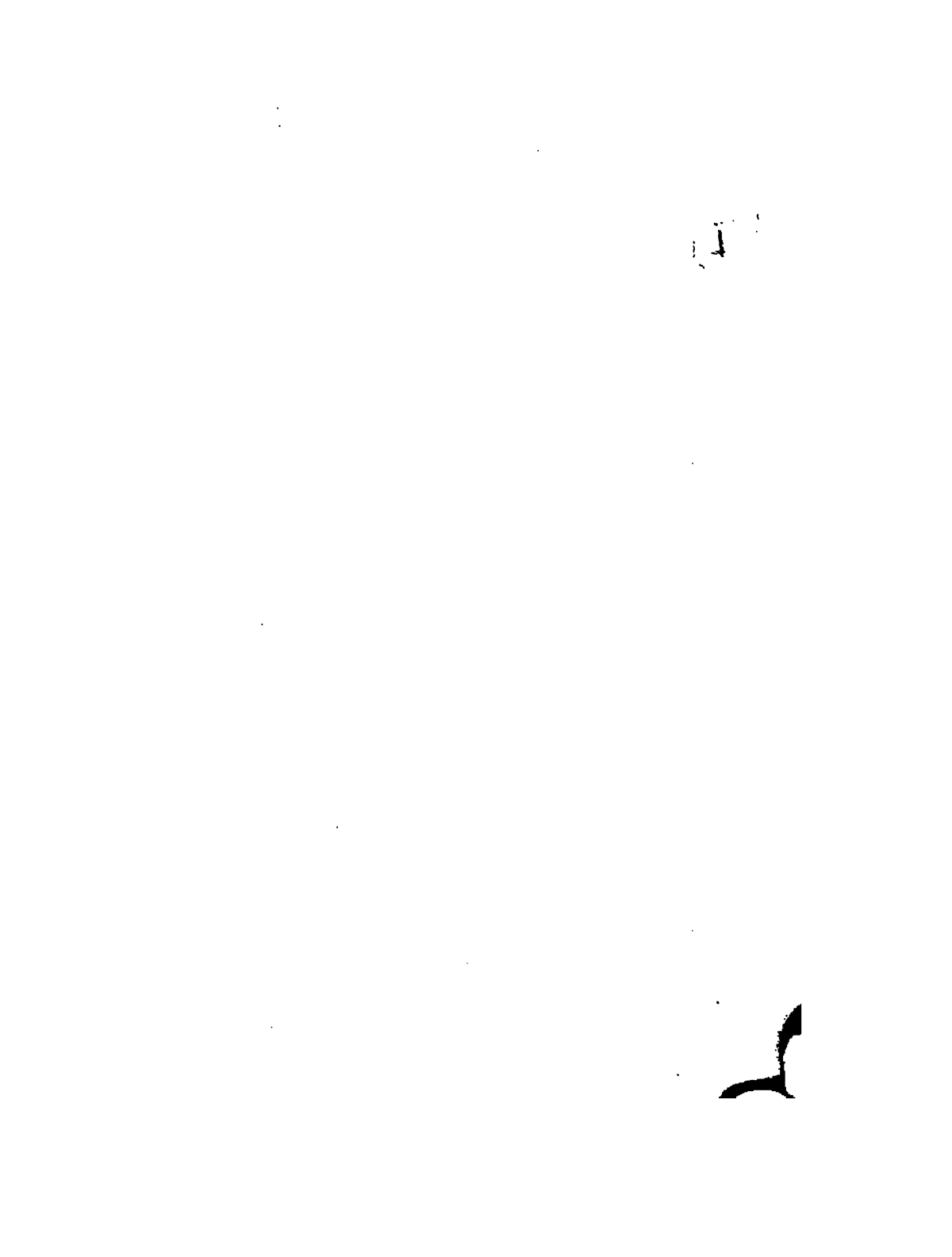
MARGERY O' THE MILL

BY

M. E. FRANCIS



MARGERY O' THE MILL

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

In a North Country Village
The Story of Dan
A Daughter of the Soil
Maime o' the Corner
Frieze and Fustian
Among the Untrodden Ways
Miss Erin
The Duenna of a Genius
Yeoman Fleetwood
Fiander's Widow
The Manor Farm
Christian Thal
Lychgate Hall
Dorset Dear
Wild Wheat
Simple Annals
Stepping Westward

MARGERY O' THE MILL

BY

M. E. FRANCIS

(MRS. FRANCIS BLUNDELL)

AUTHOR OF "STEPPING WESTWARD" "FIANDER'S WIDOW" ETC.

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MARGERY O' THE MILL

CHAPTER I

"I see the wealthy miller yet—
His double chin, his portly size,
And who that knew him could forget
The busy wrinkles round his eyes,
The slow, wise smile that round about
His dusty forehead drily curled,
Seemed half within and half without,
And full of dealing with the world."

THE stage drew up with a great clatter in the yard of the Royal George, and Harry Westacre, rising leisurely and stretching himself in the elegant fashion becoming a man of quality, stepped down from the seat of honour on the box and looked round him with a proprietary air. Squire Westacre owned all the land in that neighbourhood, and though the Royal George was freehold, young Harry considered himself as much at home there in one sense as he undoubtedly was in another.

He was a tall, good-looking youth, fashionably, almost foppishly, dressed, his brown curly hair very carefully arranged, his handsome leg displayed to advantage in its well-fitting boot.

His eyes fell on the figure of a young girl who had, like himself, descended from the top of the coach, and who now stood eagerly watching the village street as though in expectation of someone. A profusion of golden hair escaped from under her hat, and as she impatiently threw back the folds of her long cloak a very shapely figure was revealed. The face was turned away, and he could but see the rim of a pink-and-white cheek, just enough to tantalise him. He had only joined the stage at Liverpool, and had not before taken particular note of his fellow-traveller.

Even as he looked the girl uttered an exclamation of distress.

"Oh dear, will he never come!"

Harry Westacre altered his intention of proceeding immediately to the bar, and stepped towards her with a flourish of his hat.

"Pray, madam, can I assist you in any way?"

The face was turned towards him now; a very pretty face indeed, though the blue eyes were clouded with tears and the lip quivered.

"I was to be met here," she stammered. "Rob was to come—Rob, our serving-man—but I don't know what can have become of him—and time is getting on, and—and my dear father is so ill."

"Allow me, madam, to place my conveyance at your service," said Harry, with another flourish. "I have ordered a chaise to carry me to Leith, but

'twill be a pleasure and an honour to escort you first to your destination."

"Oh, sir, you are very good, but I'd liefer go with Rob if he'd only come in time. I've no mind to take you out of your road. Leith, did you say? 'Tis two miles from our place."

"Ah, you are perhaps a visitor at Lady Gillibrand's? We are neighbours, then. Allow me to introduce myself; I am Harry Westacre."

"Mr. Harry!" exclaimed the girl, with a sudden dimpling smile. "To be sure, I might ha' remembered—— Oh, there is Rob!—I thank you very much, sir, but I need trouble you no more."

Dropping a hasty curtsey, she ran towards the vehicle which had just entered the yard, and which, as the young man observed with amazement and some disgust, was a spring cart such as was commonly used by farmers and other country-folk.

"Now then, Rob, hurry up!" she cried to the burly fellow who held the reins. "What's the meaning of your being so late? That's my trunk—the yellow one—and put in my basket too. Eh, 'tis a shame to be so late! If your poor master were about you'd not serve me so."

She was clambering into the cart as she spoke, and Rob, having sulkily stowed away her luggage, resumed his place, and, jerking the reins, set the horse cantering over the cobble-stones, the girl rating him the while, and desiring him not to make the poor beast suffer for what was his fault. After a prolonged

stare Mr. Harry Westacre strolled up to the landlord, who just then came out of the house.

"Pray who is that young lady," he inquired, "and how comes she to be journeying in a farmer's cart?"

"Bless ye, Mester Harry, that's no young lady. That's Margery o' the Mill, Burchell's wench, and she's jogging home as fast as she can to see owd John afore he goes aloft, poor owd chap. He's coom to the end of his tether, an' doctor don't give him more nor a few days to live—and so he've sent for the lass fro' school. Eh, dear, we'll all ha' to go when our time cooms, but theer's a mony as'll miss poor owd John."

The young gentleman appeared only to heed the first part of this speech.

"The miller's daughter!" he exclaimed. "Who'd have thought it!"

"Ah, theer's folks as says John Burchell were a fool to set the lass up wi' so mich eddication, but she's the only child the owd chap has, an' he can't deny her naught. Yigh, she's been away a matter o' three year or more now. She nobbut coom whoam twice—I doubt yo' mun ha' been away fro' whoam else yo' mun ha' see'd her, Mester Harry. Yo' are more often away fro' whoam than not, aren't yo'?"

"I daresay I may be at home more often now," said Harry. "The prodigal's going back, Martin!"

"I'm fain to hear it, sir," said the man, with an odd look; "theer's a deal of gossip in this place about yo',

Mester Harry, and theer's some as gives out yo'll leave whoam once too often."

"Who says that?" cried the young man quickly.

"Eh, 'tis jest a bit o' nonsense. I doubt it started fro' some o' the folks at the Hall. Theer's one or two as says the Squire's gettin' out o' patience wi' yo'—but we know better than that, don't we, sir? *That* isn't so very likely, I shouldn't think. Ha, ha!"

He was eyeing the other narrowly as he spoke, and noted a momentary expression of discomfiture on his countenance; only momentary, however, for his own laugh was drowned in the burst of merriment with which Mr. Harry, turning on his heel, preceded him indoors.

. . . . . .

Old John Burchell lay dying in his upper room; a fact which he himself had some difficulty in believing, though it was painfully patent to all about him.

"Doctor says so, and I suppose we mun reckon doctor's reet," he remarked from time to time; "but it seems a strange thing all the same—I can scarce believe it."

"Yo're goin', maister—yo're goin' sure enough," groaned his mother-in-law, Mrs. Tickell. "Dear o' me! yes; it's plain to be seen. Yo're goin' a long road, John! Eh, dear! Yo' are for sure."

John turned his head upon the pillow, and gazed at her with some irritation.

Since the death of his wife, eighteen years before, Mrs. Tickell had perforce become a member of his household, and had since "done" for him and his orphan girl to the best of her ability; but he had never ceased to look upon the old lady with a kind of pitying contempt. She was a stirring body, indeed; a notable housewife in her own opinion and that of her neighbours; but she wasn't a Burchell, and her ways were not the Burchell ways, and during all the years in which she had looked after John and his motherless girl, he had never felt himself able to do more than put up with her.

"Yo' know naught about it, owd lady," he said now, after staring at her wrathfully for a moment or two. "I ought to be the best judge mysel' I should think. My head's a bit leet, and I can't seem to feel my legs anyways, but I'd be hearty enough if it wasn't for that. Yo're all in a terr'ble hurry to get rid o' me. Dr. May too——"

"Eh-h-h," sighed Mrs Tickell, shaking her head, "'tis true, Dr. May thinks very bad o' yo', John."

"Well, I tak' it very unkind o' Dr. May to think bad o' me then," retorted the sick man. "Him as has been so friendly all thae years—droppin' in whenever he'd a mind, an' smokin' his pipe in the chimney-corner, time an' again, an' callin' for a glass o' summat hot on a cowd day as good-natured as anythin'. An' now he ups an' says he can't give me more nor a few days. He's a cool 'and—I'll say that."

Mrs. Tickell folded her hands at her waist, and gazed at her son-in-law with an air of mild protest.

"He'd give ye more if he could, poor gentleman," she observed; "I reckon he's givin' ye all the time he can."

She paused, and presently continued, with the air of one who had made a discovery—

"I don't suppose it depends on Dr. May whether ye live short or long, John. I reckon it's the Lord as is going to tak' ye."

"Well then, that's what I can't agree to," growled the miller. "I can't think the Lord would tak' me when theer's sich a deal to see to. What's to become o' the mill as has been in our family a hundred year an' more?"

Turning his head on the pillow, he looked out through the open window.

The dwelling-house was set at right angles to the mill, and John from his bed could see the lower rim of the sails as they sleepily turned in a light breeze, and hear the familiar creaking noise which accompanied their movement.

"There they go," he said, more to himself than to the old woman; "ever sin' I wer a little chap I've been used to watchin' 'em. The sails o' Burchell's Mill is to be seen all over the country, and I can't think what 'ud coom to this place if they was to stand still."

Mrs. Tickell pursed up her lips and sighed, presently remarking, with a hesitating air and in a

dolorous tone, as became one who offered but imperfect consolation—

"Theer's Margery."

"Ah," rejoined the miller sharply, "theer's Margery, but what good's a slip of a lass same as her?"

"Not mich good indeed, not mich good," agreed his mother-in-law. "Her eddication'll stand in her road now, I doubt. Eh, John, 'twas a pity yo' would not be said by me. I did allus say 'twas time throwed away, but yo' gived in to her fancies same as yo've allus done. If yo' had let the wench bide at whoam, yo' could ha' picked a husband for her."

"Well, an' that's true," agreed the miller, with unexpected meekness. "I never looked to go off in sich a hurry—and eighteen's full young to wed, but it 'ud ha' been a good notion to sattle her in life afore I was took. Theer met be time yet," he went on. "I met be able to pick her a husband yet. I wonder now, who'd suit. Edward Frith happen—Edward's a good lad, but a bit stiff-necked."

"Edward reckons hisself a gentleman," said Mrs. Tickell.

"Stuff and nonsense, woman! His forebears was gentry once, and I reckon he feels hisself a cut above the rest of us, but he's no fool."

"I doubt he'd never leave his own place, and coom to play second fiddle here though," said Mrs. Tickell. "I doubt he'd never do that. No lad as had a place of his own 'ud like to do that. That'll be your difficulty, John. Yo'd not like the lass to

leave the place, and 'tisn't every lad as 'ud like to coom here to play second fiddle, as I say."

A flush rose to John's face, and he shifted his head uneasily on his pillow; but just as he was about to make an angry rejoinder, the door burst open and Margery hastened into the room. Throwing herself on her knees by her father's bedside, she flung her arms round his neck.

"Eh, my wench," he cried brokenly, "thou'rt coom, art thou? Eh, bless thee! No need to cry so soon—theer's time enough for cryin'. Theer, howd up thy head and let's see thy bonny face. My word, an' 'tis a bonny face—'tis, for sure."

His feeble hand had crept under her chin, and Margery, yielding to his touch, obediently raised her head.

"Oh, father, dear father, why didn't you send for me before?" she cried, blinking to keep back the tears.

"Well, I reckoned theer was time enough, my wench. I reckon theer's time enough too. I don't howd with Dr. May, thou knows; I'll have time enough yet to pick a husband for thee, lass."

"A husband!" gasped the girl. "I don't want a husband—I won't have one."

"Tut, tut! Thou'lt have to have one. Yo'd never be able to gaffer the lads at arter I'm gone. Yo'd couldn't keep 'em at it same as I al'ays did. They'd be playin' tricks on yo', my dear."

"No they won't!" cried Margery, springing to

her feet. "I'll not let them play tricks wi' me—I'll keep them in their places—see if I don't."

A gleam leaped into John's dim eyes.

"Well said, my wench!" he cried huskily. "Well said! Thou hast got the Burchell spirit, so young as thou art. But, eh, dear,"—in an altered tone, "what good is a wench when all's said and done? They'll impose on thee, my lass — I'm afear'd they'll impose on thee. Eh, I hope the A'mighty 'ull give me time to pick a husband for thee. I hadn't no mind to set up another maister i' the mill while I were a'gate, but I could wish I'd done it now though—I could wish I'd have chosen thee a maister afore, Margery. I met ha' been able to put him in the way o' things."

"I don't want any master," cried the girl. "I only want you, father; and if you must go, I'll be master myself."

"Ho, ho, ho!" laughed her father feebly. "Hark at her—hark at the little wench! Thou'll be maister thyself, wilt thou? nay, but thy husband 'ull ha' summat to say to that. But thy husband 'ull ha' to live here, Margery, mind that—whether he likes it or whether he doesn't, he'll have to bide here. The mill mun come first, as I and my father and my father's father, and their forebears, for years and years have lived in and took pride in. Burchell's Mill—I couldn't bear to think as the sails o' Burchell's Mill was goin' round among strangers. I couldn't rest in my grave if the last Burchell was to

leave the mill. Nay, I'll not have the mill forsook —whoever weds thee, lass, must coom here to live and carry on the workin' o' the mill, same as I did. Promise me ye'll see to that, lass."

"Father, I'll promise you that as long as the sails o' Burchell's Mill go round, I'll stop here."

"But thy husband — thy husband," said the miller feebly. "Eh, my wench, happen I'll not ha' time to find one for thee after all—a body can't get for'ard wi' sich a job as that all in a minute. I hope the Lord 'ull give me time, but if I'm called sudden——" he broke off, his lip trembling.

"My husband, whoever he is, must give me his word that he'll bide at the mill with me," cried Margery. "Theer's my hand on't."

She lifted one of her father's inert hands in her own warm and strong one, and looked down at him with kindling eyes.

"I give you my oath on't," she said.

"Right," murmured he, "right. A Burchell's word is as good as his bond. I'll dee—if I have to dee—the happier for knowing this, my lass.

"Ah, father, I wish you didn't have to die," cried Margery, and she dropped on her knees beside the bed and laid her head on the pillow close to his. "I wish you didn't have to die. What shall I do without you?"

"Give over crying, Margery, give over, there's a good lass," wailed her grandmother, violently sniffing herself. "'Tis bad for your father, honest

man, as has need of all his strength for the work he's got in hand, and it fair puts me all in a shake mysel'. 'Tis very agitating for the nerves to see a body cry so pitiful."

Margery lifted up her head promptly.

"D'ye want me to have no feeling?" she cried, her blue eyes blazing through her tears. "D'ye want me to be a stock or a stone, grandma? I'm sorry I can't oblige ye."

Once more her father chuckled faintly.

"Hark at the lass! Hark at her! The Burchell spirit again! Al'ays ready wi' an answer. Eh, I could have wished to see her start coortin'. It 'ud have been summat to see her gafferin' the young chaps—I reckon she'd know how to mak' them keep their distance. Well, well, it isn't to be, I suppose—without doctor's made a mistake."

Once more he glanced questioningly at his daughter; if Margery was of the same opinion as himself, it would seem to him that he might yet hope. But she only shook her head and fell to weeping again.

"Well, thou must only do the best thou can," he went on reluctantly. "Get wed soon—the sooner the better, for I doubt the lads 'ull want a man over them, though you have sich a spirit of your own."

"Have you thought of anybody, father?" said Margery, with unusual diffidence.

"Well, theer's one chap as I'd like very well in

some ways, but I'm not sure if he'd altogether suit. Theer, I'm gettin' a bit tired wi' so mich talkin'. We maybe hit on soombry to-morrow as we both fancy. Yo' met get a'gate o' readin' to me a bit now, while grandma's gettin' summat ready for yo' to eat. My will's made, and when I've picked a husband for thee, I reckon I'll ha' settled everything i' this world, so I might as well begin to think about t'other. Theer, dry thy een, my wench; what must be, must be. Let's have no more crying. Let's do things right and proper. I al'ays held up my head so long as I were a'gate—I'll die a gradely death—dom it all! that I will."

And with these pious sentiments John Burchell gave himself up to preparation for his end.

CHAPTER II

"Scorned—to be scorned by one I scorn,
Is that a matter to make me fret?
That a calamity hard to be borne?
Well, he may live to hate me yet.
Fool that I am to be vexed with his pride."

ON a certain April evening, three months later, the firelit windows of the Red Dog Inn sent out a comfortable glow into the wet dusk which was a welcome sight to Edward Frith as his tired horse turned the angle of the lane.

"Now then, Lightfoot," cried he, leaning forward and patting the poor beast's drooping neck, "there'll be an hour's rest and warmth for thee and me before we start to cross the moor."

The Red Dog was a very humble little roadside hostelry, and when Tim the landlord was busy, or when, as now, the weather was uninviting, late callers were expected to see to their horses themselves; it being the custom of Humpy Jim, the ostler and general factotum, to retire early. Edward led his horse into the stable, rubbed him down, and found him a truss of hay; then he made his way round the house to the kitchen, where Mrs. Barnes was frying a great dish of bacon and eggs.

Without waiting for a response to his hasty rap he entered, Mrs. Barnes addressing him shrilly, without, however, turning her head; in truth the good woman was somewhat unwieldy in person, and her present stooping position would have rendered the movement difficult.

"Bless my soul, whoever's that brastin' in wi'out 'by your leave,' or 'wi' your leave,' an' the wind blowin' 'ard enough to upset the pan? Sich a wet neet too! I'll not ha' folks tramplin' into my kitchen wi' the wayter runnin' off 'em an' makin' puddles on my clean floor. Who is it, I say?"

"It's I, Mrs. Barnes. Edward Frith. You'll not be vexed with me for coming in to dry myself a bit, surely?"

"Nay, I'll not be vexed wi' yo', Ed'ard. Yo' should ha' named yo'rsel straight off an' I wouldn't ha' got a'gate o' bargin'. Theer's sich a mony wastrels cooms runnin' in an' out I have to speak a bit sharp by times. Tak' off your coat, mon, an' coom nigh to fire. Supper'll be ready in a minute, an' I'll warm yo' a drop of ale."

"Thank you kindly," said Edward.

Removing his coat, and prudently shaking it outside the door before hanging it up on one of the line of clothes-pegs which garnished the wall in its neighbourhood, he approached the fire and stood looking down with a smile at the landlady's operations. She found no time for conversation until she had removed the contents of the frying-pan

to the deep dish which stood ready on the polished bars of the fender; but having artistically arranged the fizzling bacon with a two-pronged fork, and anxiously ascertained that not a single egg was broken, she straightened herself and looked him in the face.

The result of her scrutiny did not seem to satisfy her, for she frowned.

"Yo're but poorly, seemin'ly," she observed. "My word, I doubt yo' get thinner every day, lad."

"I'm tired to-night," rejoined the young farmer; "and I was wet and cold till now."

"Well, sit yo' down, as how 'tis; sit yo' down, Ed'ard."

It was characteristic of the man that in a country where nicknames were common he should have none—no one even used a diminutive in addressing him. Somehow "Ned" or "Teddy" would have seemed incongruous if applied to his somewhat imposing personality. Even when, as quite a little lad, he had put up his shaggy pony at the Red Dog on his way to the Grammar School, the landlord and his wife had invariably greeted him by his full name.

He was a tall young fellow, with dark hair clustering closely round a well-shaped head—something in the carriage of that head, and indeed of the whole person, reminding his neighbours that the Friths had been gentry once; he had light blue eyes that contrasted oddly with the straight

black brows which overshadowed them, and a face habitually pale in spite of its exposure to sun and wind; habitually melancholy too, for he was a man accustomed to disappointment, and hampered by much vain struggling with unfriendly Fortune. Yet those who knew him intimately loved him well; there was almost maternal solicitude in the tone which Sally Barnes now invited him to partake of a ginger cordial.

As he refused, laughingly dropping into a chair the while, and stretching out his long legs to the blaze, she informed him that he should at least have a drop "o' the gradely mak'" to warm his heart, and, taking a jug from the dresser-shelf, left the room, winking and nodding.

Left alone, Edward cast a contented glance about him; the big, bright kitchen had ever held for him pleasant memories, and on this particular night the mere contrast of the cold, dark world without, which he must again so soon face, heightened its attractions. The flagged floor was strewn with sand, the deal table and dresser, scrubbed to snowy whiteness, were now gilded by the glow of the fire; bright pots and pans winked at each other from the ochre-washed walls, and hams and flitches in their muslin bags cast fantastic shadows on the ceiling.

The creaking of the sign without, as it swung in the wet gusts, conjured up a vision which must presently be turned to reality. The moor, silent,

solitary, swept by a furious gale; so dark that the narrow track along which his horse must pass would be scarcely distinguishable. It was on that track that his thoughts dwelt now, fancying he saw it shining where by chance a stray moonbeam caught it between scurrying clouds, rising and falling with the undulations of the waste, pointing, as it seemed, with a sure, inexorable finger to that other solitude which he called home.

All at once the outer door of the adjoining room, a room dignified by the title of bar-parlour, was slammed to with a violence which reacted on another door opening into the kitchen, and caused it to swing ajar. Through the aperture he caught sight of the two men who had just entered, and who, with their backs towards him, were talking with great animation. In the somewhat drawling tones of the one who had flung himself into an easy chair he recognised the voice of Mr. Harry Westacre, the second son of the Squire of Leith. The other, a stout fellow in sleeved waistcoat and leather cap, he identified as the head man at Burchell's Mill.

"And she's not wed yet, you say," observed the young gentleman. "I thought she'd have been snapped up before this. She's pretty enough."

"As bonny a lass as is to be seen in the whole countryside," responded Rob, the miller's man. "But her feyther's nobbut three months dead, an' I doubt it's ower soon for onybody to start coortin' her."

"There's such a thing as being too nice in such matters. The girl's in need of consolation, and the first-comer will have all the better chance. I've a mind to try for her myself."

"Nay, Mester Harry, yo're jokin' sure," said Rob, with evident uneasiness.

"No, I'm in sober earnest. Pretty, rich, young, and her own mistress—I might do worse. Beggars musn't be choosers, and I believe I'm a beggar now."

"You don't look like it, Mester Harry," said Rob obsequiously.

"The Squire's turned me out though, bag and baggage—swears he'll never see me again; and the old gentleman generally knows his own mind."

"Dear me, Mester Harry, and what for, if I may make so bold?" queried Rob.

"Debts, Rob, debts. He's paid them once, and paid them twice—but he swears he won't do it the third time. 'Pon my life, 'tis hard for a gentleman to live in these days. A man of quality can't be expected to bother his head from morning to night about beggarly tradesfolk's bills. The rascals must wait, I say—but the mischief is, they won't wait long enough."

"I'm sure, Mester Harry, your father's son hasn't no need to be particular about a few pounds," said the miller as he paused.

"Just my opinion; but Squire Westacre doesn't agree with us, Rob. He says it makes a deal of

difference when it's the younger son that gets into difficulties. 'Damme, sir,' says he to me to-day, 'you couldn't give me more trouble if you were my heir. I've had enough of this,' says he. 'The estate won't stand it. I'll give you a fifty-pound note for the last time—and you may go to the devil as fast as you like,' says he. But I don't think I'll go to the devil—I think I'll try for pretty Margery."

"What would your honoured father say to that, Mester Harry?" inquired Rob.

"'Twill be as good as a play, Rob! The notion of the old gentleman's rage tickles my fancy vastly. He'll have a fit as sure as my name's Harry. A village wench for a daughter-in-law, and his dear son setting up as a miller within a stone's throw of the Hall! Ha, ha, ha! 'tis most excellent sport, I think."

An expression of increasing indignation overspread Edward Frith's face as the conversation progressed, and he now made a step forward as though to interrupt it, but stopped short, restrained by an afterthought.

"Why should I interfere? After all it is not my business. The fellow Rob should know better than to encourage that young scamp in such talk, let him be the Squire's son forty times over."

Rob, however, appeared to have no idea of remonstrating, though presently it became evident that he too disapproved of young Master Harry Westacre's views.

"Come now, squire," he said, "fair play is fair play. I don't fancy this notion o' yours. 'Twas me put it into your head, I doubt, talkin' about my own chances—I've no mind to throw away my own chances. I've just as good a right to try my luck as you."

"Pooh! do you suppose a pretty lass will so much as look at you, Rob, when a man of fashion is to be had?"

"I reckon a man of fashion 'ud make a very poor miller, Mester Harry," returned Rob, chuckling. "Now, I've been at the business ever sin' I were a little lad not higher than the table. Nobry knows the workin' o' Burchell's Mill as well as I do. Poor John, the very last evenin' afore he died, he made the wench promise she'd keep me on as long as she could. I were theer and I heared him, and she gave her word. I have the best right to speak first, and I will too."

"No, no, Rob, make room for your betters! I tell you she wouldn't look at you."

"I'm not so sure about that, sir. She looked at me mighty kind the morn after the funeral."

"Did she indeed? You rascal, how dare you put a spoke in my wheel?"

Here the young squire, with a roar of laughter, clapped his inferior good-naturedly on the back.

"Come, Rob, think better of it. Haven't we been in mischief together almost ever since I could walk, and haven't I taken you out shooting and

fishing and what not, in your spare time? Didn't I treat you to as good a cock-fight last Saturday as was to be seen between this and Lancaster? Haven't you got many a pretty penny from me for keeping those birds—eh, you villain? Don't you attempt to spoil sport now, I say."

"A main's one thing, Mester Harry, and a wife's another. I'll not stand by and let you keep me out—rabbit me if I do!"

The fellow's face was flushed, and he spoke in a surly tone.

Harry laughed carelessly.

"Let's toss for it," he said. "Heads, I win."

He took a guinea from his pocket and spun it in the air.

"Heads!" he cried jubilantly, as it fell upon the sanded floor.

"You have first chance then," said Rob sulkily, "but after that 'twill be my turn. I bet she won't have you, Mester Harry."

Harry laughed, and restored the coin to his pocket.

"Don't be too sure," he said.

Both men started back as Edward, flinging the door of communication wide open, came striding across the room.

"'Tis a shame," he cried angrily, "a shame! a scandal! I'll not allow it. I'll warn the lass."

"Pray, sir," said Harry Westacre coolly, "how

came you to be listening to our conversation? 'Tis a damned dirty trick to stand eavesdropping."

"Sir," retorted Edward, "you should not have spoken of such matters in a public-house. I listened to you with very great disgust I can assure you. As for you, Rob, you ought to be ashamed to look any honest man in the face. Your old master is scarcely cold, and now you are taking liberties with his daughter's name! You, who should protect and watch over her for her father's sake, if not for her own. Poor, lonely young thing."

"That was spoke mighty tender," cried Rob, with a sneer. "I reckon yo've a notion o' lookin' after the wench yo'rsel'. Her bit o' brass 'ud come in handy yon at Moorside Farm. 'Tis badly wanted theer."

"To be sure, to be sure. This is Mr. Frith, I believe," drawled Harry languidly. "Yes, I remember now — Mr. Frith — out-at-elbows fellow who rides a broken-winded horse. How do you do, sir?"

This was said with a contemptuous glance at the young farmer's coat, which, however, threadbare as it was, by no means deserved the scornful epithet applied to it.

"I am not ashamed of being a poor man, Mr. Westacre," said Edward. "As for you, Rob, I don't know what you're driving at. I haven't set eyes on John Burchell's daughter since she was a

child—she has been away these three years schooling. I doubt if I could call her name to mind, and I certainly have no notion of being anything more than a friend to her. A young creature thrown on the world like that needs friends, and her father and mine were lads together. Besides," he added more warmly, "I'd be loath to let a young lass be deceived and put upon, whoever she may be."

"Well, don't yo' go interferin' wi' us, Mester Frith. Yo' mind yo'r own business—pull away at they two ends which yo've such a job to mak' meet, and leave me and Mester Harry alone. We don't wish the lass no harm, do we, Mester Harry? We mean to act fair and square by her. Mester Harry wants a home and a bit o' brass in his pocket, and a bonny wife to look after both the one and t'other, so he's going to try his chance. And if he don't succeed I'll try mine. I'll work for her faithful, same as I've allus worked, but I've a mind to be maister i'stead o' bein' man. Theer isn't no harm in that. I'd be a good gaffer to her, and more suitable nor many another; so, by your leave, Mester Frith, I'll ask yo' to keep yo'r mouth shut and not meddle."

"I'll do no such thing then," cried Edward hotly. "I'll make it my business to see Miss Burchell the first thing to-morrow morning and warn her. What sort of husband would either of you prove if you make so little of her now? Haggling over her—actually tossing up for her. 'Tis a disgrace, I say. I'll warn her!"

Harry's hand involuntarily flew out, but dropped almost immediately. He shrugged his shoulders.

"Now then, Mester Frith," cried Rob, squaring up at Edward threateningly, "mun yo' and me settle this business straight off? Coom outside and stand up to me like a mon."

"Coom! coom!" cried a jovial voice from the doorway, and Landlord Tim appeared, jug in hand, the round, alarmed face of his wife being perceptible in the background. "What's all this to-do? Ed'ard Frith, yo'd never be for fightin', lad! Lord ha' mercy me, I couldn't have believed it. Yo', the most peaceablest man in all the country-side! And yo', Rob, what do yo' coom makin' a disturbance in my bar for? Yo' keep quiet, yo'rself, or I'll call in a two-three lads as'll run yo' out of this pretty quick."

Rob's great fist dropped by his side, and he fell back sullenly.

Harry laughed uneasily and stepped up to him. "Best let him alone," he muttered. "Don't let's have any brawling over it. It won't suit our book to have the matter made public. If the girl gets wind of it we may both whistle for her."

"But he'll tell her all about it to-morrow," grunted Rob. "He said he would, and he's a man as never breaks his word."

"Hush, you fool! Now, landlord, what is there to pay for that brandy we had in the bar?"

The host named a small sum, and Harry tossed a

coin upon the table and strode out of the room, followed by Rob.

"'Tis a strange thing," remarked the landlord, "an' a pity, such a fine young gentleman as Mester Harry should be so thick with a chap same's Rob Rigby. 'Tis not fit company for him—I wonder he should make so little of hissel'. But theer's folks, Ed'ard, as likes to be king o' their company, and I reckon Mester Harry's one of them. Being the second son, they say he isn't thought so much on at the Hall. Eh, they tell me the Squire has turned him out for good and all. Well, well, 'tis strange how folks can quarrel with their own flesh and blood; I doubt the old gentleman was fair tired of his wild ways—but whatever was ye' goin' to fight Rob Rigby for, Ed'ard?"

The young farmer flushed. "He had been giving me impudence," he said after a pause. "I am not a quarrelsome man, as you say, but there are some things I can't stand."

"Coom, Ed'ard," said Mrs. Barnes, "I've got a sup of our best October here for yo'. Step into the kitchen an' set yo' down an' enjoy it. My word, I'm fain them quarrelsome chaps is gone, though Mester Harry *is* the Squire's son, and I'd be proud to have him lodgin' here if he'd behave hissel'. But Rob's an ill-conditioned chap, no favryite o' mine. But coom, Ed'ard."

Giving Frith a friendly nudge, she led the way into the kitchen, Edward and her husband following her.

"Well, coom, pull up as how 'tis. 'Tis a poor heart as never rej'ices," said the host. "I'm sure 'tis a pleasure to have a bit of a talk wi' yo'. Yo' don't often coom this way now. I doubt I havena seen yo' sin' poor John Burchell's berrin'! That were a gradely berrin', weren't it? I never see'd nothin' done more nice. Poor owd John, he made a very handsome corpse."

"'Twas a pity," said Mrs. Barnes, as she set the bacon and eggs on the table, "'twas an awful pity the wench couldn't walk wi' her grandma. Mrs. Tickell towd me she had the beautifullest blacks a yard deep in crape, and a gradely fall to her bunnet; but she wer took fainty-like, jist as they was startin', an' had to lay on her bed."

"That's why we didn't see her then," said Edward; "I was wondering."

"Eh, poor yoong wench," resumed Sally, "no one can blame her. I reckon she wer like to be takken-to. She only comed whoam the night afore John wer took, an' she never reckoned he'd go so quick. Dee'd in his sleep he did, poor owd lad. Eh, Mrs. Tickell thought the lass 'ud dee o' the shock next morn when she coom in an' found him."

"Well," observed Tim, with a genial air, "it's to be hoped we'll have a weddin' next. How does the world wag wi' thee, lad?"

"Badly enough, Tim," rejoined Edward. "The crops were poor last year, and I can't lay my hands

on enough money to stock the farm. But I'll get on somehow—I'll stick to the old place as long as there is breath in my body, you may be sure.

"So I've heerd yo' say mony a time," said Tim, and buried his face in the pewter.

CHAPTER III

" His words are bonds, his oaths are oracles;
. . . . . .
His heart as far from fraud as heaven from earth.
. . . . . .
The broken sheds look'd sad and strange;
Unlifted was the clinking latch;
Weeded and worn the ancient thatch
Upon the lonely moated grange."

THE night was quite dark when Edward emerged into the open air; but it caused him no disquietude. The old horse knew the way to Moorside Farm as well by night as by day, and its owner was in no great hurry to reach home. As he set forth again with the fine rain driving into his face, and the horse's feet falling with a sucking sound on the spongy peat, the vision rose before him of the lonely house to which he was bound: the old grey house which had once been a manor-house, but which was now weather-worn and dilapidated, with empty, poverty-stricken rooms, rows of lifeless windows, and damp-stained walls. His old housekeeper would come in answer to his knock, and would guide him by the light of one flickering candle to the parlour, desolate and

gloomy at this hour; and there he would sit and read perhaps, or con over his accounts till bedtime came; not a very cheerful prospect! And yet he loved the place—he loved every stone of the crumbling walls, every leaf of the elms which pressed so close about the house, every rood of the uncultivated fields. Yes, as he had told Landlord Tim, while life remained to him he would cling to it.

Urging the old horse to as rapid a trot as it was capable of, and stooping over its neck to avoid the driving rain, he proceeded for some way without interruption; but all at once the animal started, stumbled, and rolled over, crushing his rider beneath its weight.

"Good God! what is this?" cried Edward, with a groan of pain. "Lightfoot! why, Lightfoot, I have never known thee make a false step. And now I believe my leg is broken! Come, lad—up! up!"

With a violent effort the animal recovered itself and got upon its legs, but Edward, though he was released, found himself unable to move; the agonising pain of his leg when he made the attempt warning him of the advisability of keeping quiet.

"'Tis strange," he muttered to himself. "I never knew thee do such a thing, Lightfoot—and the path is straight enough—but how mortal dark it is! Well, there is nothing for it but to wait till

morning, unless you can bring someone to help me, boy. There, go home, and see if thou canst make shift to call someone."

The poor animal, however, stood dejectedly by its prostrate master, sniffing at him occasionally in evident distress; but neither encouraging words, nor even light strokes with the whip, could induce it to go more than a few paces away from him.

Had not Edward been so preoccupied with his own misfortune, he might have descried the shadowy outlines of two heads behind a clump of furze which grew on one side of the path; and had not the wind blown so strongly, and the confusion been increased by the noisy downpour of rain, he might have heard voices whispering cautiously but a few paces away from him.

"Neat, uncommon neat, upon my soul," muttered Harry Westacre. "That saves us a deal of trouble, Rob, my boy. No need now for that big stick of yours. The chap's pinned fast by the leg, and if we take ourselves off now it will seem as if there had been an accident."

"Yon rope across the road, though, will look a bit queer," responded Rob.

"Maybe they'll think a cow or a goat has been tethered here. Let 'em think what they like—'tis no concern of ours. The job's done and that's enough. Come away now—lie low and crawl for a bit, and when we are at a safe distance get up and run for it."

Keeping well behind the cover of the furze, and being further aided by the darkness, the worthy couple made their escape without attracting the attention of Edward, who was indeed too much engrossed with his own pain and misery to pay much attention to what was going on about him.

All night long he lay there on the sodden ground, while Lightfoot wandered near, now cropping at the short herbage, now returning to his side. The first gleam of light showed him the cause of the accident. A stout rope was stretched across the path from one furze-bush to another. He was by this time thoroughly exhausted, and merely glanced at it vaguely.

"That's what brought poor Lightfoot down," he muttered. "The poor old lad couldn't be expected to know it was there. Folks have no right to tether their beasts in the middle of the path. Eh, I wish to the Lord somebody would come! I wonder if I'm to die here on the moor."

Before the sun had fully risen, his anxiety on that score was set at rest; a faint *thud, thud* of hoofs was heard falling upon the peat, and presently a horseman came in sight. It was the doctor from Little Upton starting on his early rounds.

"Why, Edward Frith, lad, it's never you!" he cried, drawing rein. "What, have you been making a night of it?"

"A merry night, indeed, Dr. May. I've broken

my leg, and have been lying in this quagmire since nine o'clock last night. Lightfoot came down with me."

"Lightfoot came down with you, did he?" cried the doctor, alighting and bending over him. "Upon my life, you're right, Edward — the leg is badly broken. Could you make shift, do you think, to stick in the saddle if I lifted you up? Lightfoot came down, did he? Shame on that venerable steed! How did it happen?"

"I don't know I'm sure," said Edward faintly; "he tripped over that rope there. But what folks want with tying up a cow in the middle of a moor I can't think."

"It does seem a strange thing," responded the doctor. "There's no animal of any kind to be seen, which makes it all the stranger. 'Pon my life"—stooping to examine the rope—"it looks as if it had been done on purpose. 'Tis regularly knotted."

"Nay, nay," groaned the other impatiently, "there'd be no reason for that, and beasts are queer things. If it was a goat now, it would go round and round, and in and out, till it got the rope tied up as fast as hands could make it. Very likely that's what happened. The creature knotted up its tether till it couldn't reach the bit of pasture here, and then broke away."

"Never mind how it happened," said the doctor. "My business now is to get you home and to bed,

my friend. I'm afraid you'll have to stay on your back for many a day. Here, Lightfoot, come over, old boy. Stand still! Now, Edward, get your arms round my neck and help yourself all you can. Up! That's it. I'm afraid it won't be a pleasant ride, my lad."

Edward had by this time been hoisted to the saddle, where he crouched with his injured leg dangling helplessly. His face was white and drawn with agony, but he endeavoured to smile in answer to the doctor's words.

It seemed an eternity before they reached the farm. Two labourers, hastily summoned, carried their young master with more goodwill than deftness to his couch. Old Molly rushed hither and thither, lamenting loudly and hindering operations as much as possible. Dr. May looked round the dismal room with a shudder. The paper was peeling from the walls, the curtains faded and almost in rags, the four-post bed, with its worm-eaten pillars and dingy hangings, looked about as cheerful as a catafalque.

"I tell you what it is, Edward," he said, as he threw his hat upon the table, "you want a wife badly."

"Who'd marry me?" groaned Edward, with a grimace that was partly of pain, partly of self-depreciation.

"I fancy it wouldn't be a hard job to find a mate for you," laughed the other. "Many a bonny lass would be willing enough to take up with a fine

young fellow like you. You should look out for a girl with a bit of money, my boy."

"I'll do nothing of the kind," returned Edward irritably. "If I wed at all it shall be for love; and it doesn't seem very likely any way. This is hardly the kind of place to bring a young lass to. Now, doctor, if you could make it convenient to attend to my leg, I'd be obliged—the bones are grinding together in a way I don't much fancy."

"I've sent that infernal old woman to look for some laths and some old linen, but she doesn't seem to have wit enough to find 'em. No, I've taken her character away—here she comes at last."

He proceeded to prepare the splints and bandages with skill and rapidity; his eyes wandering occasionally round the room the while, and resting half-humorously, half-critically upon his patient.

"There's old Burchell's daughter at the mill now," he remarked presently; "Margery, they call her—she's a fine stirring wench and a handsome one. She'd be better with a husband. Now, how about this leg? Let's get it straight to begin with. Have you never a mind to turn miller, man?"

"No," retorted Edward, from between his set teeth; "I'll bide here in the old place as long as there's breath in me."

"That's a pity," said the doctor, who was by this time well at work; "I hear she gave her word to her father never to leave the mill as long as the sails go round. Am I hurting you at all?"

"No more than you can help, I daresay," returned the young man. Big drops were standing on his forehead and his very lips were white, but his eyes met the other's unflinchingly.

"Grin and bear it, that's your motto, I fancy," said Dr. May, giving another twirl to the bandage. "You carry it all through life. You'd rather stay and rot in this tumbledown place than take a step to better yourself. Grin and bear it, eh?"

"I don't think I grin," said Edward.

After the doctor had left him, and Molly had withdrawn to concoct a posset which she declared to be invaluable in such cases, Edward fell to cogitating anxiously on the perilous position of Margery Burchell, and the course which it would be best for him to pursue with regard to her. Had it not been for his untoward accident, he had meant to visit her that very day for the express purpose of warning her of her danger; but now what was he to do? Dr. May had warned him that he would be a prisoner for many weeks; a personal interview would therefore be impossible unless she consented to call upon him. The young man laughed at the very idea—that was quite out of the question. He might communicate with her by a trusty messenger. But how explain the case to any third party? He felt himself unequal to the task. Nothing remained but to write, and Edward was not much of a penman.

When Molly returned, however, with an unsavoury-looking concoction in an earthenware cup, she was astonished at being ordered to fetch Edward's desk without delay. It was a heavy, brass-bound one, yet, nevertheless, the young man insisted on having it placed upon his bed, and, in spite of his cramped position, managed to scrawl a few lines.

"DEAR MISS BURCHELL,—I meant to call at the mill and pay my Respects this day, but am unfortunately prevented as my leg is Broke."

He paused and reflected for a moment or two, with knitted brows. He had made a good start at any rate, and demonstrated that the reason for his non-appearance was a good one. Presently he went on, grinding the pen into the paper—

"I had it in my mind, being a friend of your honoured Father—indeed he was one of the best friends I had—to give you a word or two of Advice, you being left Alone in the world, and maybe wanting someone——"

Here Edward came to a standstill again. The lass mightn't like that—young lasses were ticklish things, and 'twas hard for a man to know how to tackle them. After much pondering and nibbling of the pen he scored out the word "someone," and wrote "such" on the top.

"I have reason to believe," he continued, "that more than one Person has Designs against you, even those that you trust most. Be on your guard,

dear Madam, Be careful Who you place confidence in. Keep them you are set over well in their Place, and don't put confidence in Strangers."

Here Edward let his head drop back upon the pillow, and lay still for a moment, exhausted but triumphant.

"I don't think I could put it plainer than that in a letter. 'Twouldn't do to name names in a letter; the lass might very like take it ill. I've put her on her guard, and that's enough."

Propping himself up, and dipping his pen once more into the ink, he concluded the missive, "Hoping you'll excuse the liberty I am taking as a friend and well-wisher and meaning for your good, I remain, Madam, your obedient, humble servant,

"EDWARD FRITH"

The letter was addressed, duly sealed with a wafer, and dispatched by hand, and throughout the long day, as Edward lay manfully enduring his pain and weariness, he wondered more and more how the girl would take his well-meant counsels and what she would reply.

No answer was brought by the messenger who had taken the note, but on the following morning a letter came, addressed in the delicate, flowing writing taught at Miss Wainwright's Boarding School. Miss Burchell's sentiments were beautifully expressed and very much to the point, her education having evidently not been thrown away on her.

"DEAR SIR,—I am in receipt of your communication, for which I beg to thank you. My late Father was good enough to instruct me before his death as to the rules of my conduct, and my dear Grandmother is living with me here, and will be able to give me all the advice I may require. With my sincere thanks for the kind interest which as my Father's friend you take in my concerns, I beg to remain, dear Sir, yours faithfully,

"MARGERY BURCHELL"

"Perverse little hussy!" cried Edward, tearing up the note and throwing the fragments across to the rusty grate. "I'll not mix or meddle in her affairs any more. She's got her grandmother, has she? Well, poor old John thought little enough of that old lady, but perhaps the girl has more respect for her."

But though he vowed to think no more of the saucy lass at the mill, or of her affairs, his vexation somehow did not pass away; and when Dr. May called that evening, he found his patient flushed and feverish.

"Now, then, what's amiss?" he cried, sitting down beside him. "You'll get on all right if you don't fret and worry. What's a broken bone or two to a healthy chap like you? And there's not so much stirring about this God-forsaken place of yours that you need fume when you are not able to look after it. Why, your pulse is galloping, and I'll wager your head is aching fit to split! What's to do?"

"I'm a fool, doctor," returned the young man. "I'm vexing myself about matters which don't concern me at all. But the mischief is I'm made that way. If I see things going wrong I want to set 'em right, and John Burchell was a good friend to me—yes, I can't forget that he helped me once to tide over an anxious time. I feel as if I couldn't stand by and see his daughter get into trouble."

"Ho, ho," said the doctor, and then he gave a long whistle.

"You needn't look so knowing, sir," cried Frith, flushing; "I haven't seen the lass since she was a child, but she's old John's daughter and—— But you may as well hear the whole story."

Hereupon he related the conversation which he had overheard at the Red Dog, and the correspondence which had ensued between himself and Margery.

"I didn't like to speak out more plain," he added. "Not in a letter. I could mayhap have said something more if I saw her, but I was afraid of writing it. It might upset her too much, thinking her name was made so little of. And what could she do without Rob, after all?"

"You'd better let me say a word," said Dr. May. "I'm an old man, so she can't be saucy to me; and she knows me. Bless me, I've been attending her ever since she was a baby! Not that the wench ever had a day's sickness that she could avoid. She picked up measles, whooping-cough, and

such-like with the rest of the village children, but I tell you 'twould be a bad thing for doctors if the rest of the world was like her. You haven't seen her since she was a child, haven't you? Why, man, what have you been about? There's not her match in the country."

"I'm not one to go gadding about," returned the patient testily.

"She's worth seeing though," went on the other. "A face like a rose, and hair—well, I always thought it was rubbish to talk about golden hair till I saw hers; and blue eyes—not your soft, swimmy, namby-pamby blue, but blue with fire in it. I tell you she's too good for that scamp Harry Westacre—and as for Rob—— Damn his impudence! She's meat for his masters."

Edward rolled his head restlessly on the pillow.

"You speak warmly, doctor," he said; adding, with a half-smile, "I thought you never looked at a woman."

"I don't often look at one nowadays," returned the other, with a sigh; "but there was a bonny lass once! That little, bright-eyed minx at the mill reminds me of her. There is a dimple near her lip—faith, it makes my old heart ache sometimes when I look at it."

"What became of the bonny lass?" asked Edward softly.

"She married the wrong man, lad," returned the other, with a laugh. He paused, gazing at his

patient oddly, and presently added, "I ought not to say so to you, perhaps, but sometimes truth will out; and though I am not a coxcomb I have always thought it. Has it never struck you, Edward, that I take a somewhat particular interest in you?"

"Yes indeed, sir," returned the young farmer quickly, "I have noticed it, and set it down to your kindness of heart."

"Your father was a younger man than I," said Dr. May, with apparent irrelevance, "and a good-looking rascal—I'll say that for him. But your mother would have done better to have married me, for all that. She had yellow hair," he continued musingly, "much the colour of that wench's yonder—I never was one to fancy your gipsies—and she had something of the same downright saucy way with her. Well, I have remained a bachelor as you see—but you are her son, and if I can help it you shan't marry the wrong woman."

"There's no question of marriage for me at all," returned Edward irritably; "and if you've any notion of making up a match between me and Margery Burchell, put it out of your head, doctor. I am sick to death of the name of the girl. What have I to do with her? I'd be loath for her father's daughter to get put upon—that's all. Yet when I tried to say a civil word of warning I was mighty soon set down. Since you take an interest in her, sir, you had best try and look after her."

"I take an interest in her because she is, as it

were, the shadow of your mother, Edward," returned the other; "but I take a greater interest in you because you are your mother's very substance. You dog! Have you nothing better than this to say to me in return for the sentimental tale I told you just now? Egad, I never thought to rake up that old story again for anyone."

The yeoman leaned forward and caught him by the hand.

"I have to say that I'm grateful to you, sir," he cried, with real warmth and earnestness; "and the thought that one man living takes an interest in me makes the world a different place. But for all that, I'll live and die a lonely man like yourself."

"We'll see about that," cried the doctor.

CHAPTER IV

"A rosebud set with little wilful thorns,
As sweet as English air could make her——"

THE April sunshine was dancing on the panelled walls of the mill-house parlour when Dr. May was ushered in, stepping past Mrs. Tickell with a smile and a little bow, such as he usually bestowed on the more aristocratic of his patients.

Mrs. Tickell did not look particularly aristocratic as she stood there in her bedgown and striped petticoat, and with her mob-cap set a little crooked over her black front; and her face did not lighten in response to the doctor's civility.

"I'll have a look for our Margery," she said in a doleful tone; "she'll be somewhere about the place. She's al'ays out of doors, sir; I never can get her to sit still, nobbut jist at meal-time. She'll not be said by nobry—our Margery won't. She's a Burchell all over—that wilful—that set on her own way! But I'll have a look for her."

She crossed the room to the window, and began to draw it to.

"Sich a lass as she is for fresh air," she grumbled. "As I say to her sometimes, 'Margery, I doubt, if

you had your way, we'd all be blowed out of our cheers.'"

"Fresh air is a grand thing, Mrs. Tickell," said Dr. May. "Margery's right for once; fresh air is the best medicine anyone can have. No, don't shut the window, please—there's no draught; and if there were I'd like it."

"Well, to be sure!" ejaculated Mrs. Tickell. "The world's going mad, I welly believe."

With that she left the room, and the doctor presently heard her calling with a dismally uplifted voice for her granddaughter.

"That's a girl!" he muttered to himself. "Fresh air and outdoor tastes. The bonniest lass in the countryside, too. Why the dickens can't she and Edward come together? He'd find the difference between yonder musty old ruin and this place."

He glanced round approvingly; the tiled floor was raddled to a nicety and sanded; the polished walls gleamed like mirrors. There were patchwork cushions in the oak settle by the wide hearth, and a beau-pot of wallflowers and daffodils on the round table in the middle of the room. Everything was bright, cleanly, wholesome.

His meditations were broken in upon by a voice sounding from immediately under the window—not Mrs. Tickell's, but a young voice, raised in angry inquiry.

"Rob! Are you there, Rob?"

"I'm here," came the sulky response from the neighbouring mill.

"Come here. It is I who want you."

"I'm coming—missus."

"Didn't I tell you to send for that wheat from Little Upton this morning? Why wasn't it done?"

"I didn't think there was no such hurry," growled Rob.

"There was hurry, if I said you were to send for it. You may just go and fetch it yourself now."

"*Me!*" in a tone of amazement.

"Yes, you. It will teach you to remember my orders another time. Put Dobbin in the light waggon after dinner, and take him yourself."

Rob's footsteps were heard retreating, but he gave no verbal answer. The doctor chuckled and rubbed his hands.

"Part of my lecture is not needed, I see. The young woman seems to know how to keep Master Rob in his place."

The parlour door opened, and Margery entered. A sunny, breezy creature she looked this morning, with her yellow hair ruffled, and her cheeks flushed till her face in truth resembled the rose to which her old friend had likened it. According to the habit of her class, she reserved her mourning for Sundays, and wore a pink gingham gown, low-necked, and short-sleeved, according to the custom of the day; her skin was of that milk-white order which scarcely tans with the sun. A few freckles, indeed, were perceptible here and there on her face, but in the old man's eyes they added to its charm.

"Well, child, well," he said, "I needn't ask how you are. The doctor has come to see you but not to physic you."

Margery dropped a little curtsey, and invited him cordially to have a glass of wine.

"Cowslip wine of my own making," she added.

"Not so early in the day, my dear," said the doctor, with a twinkle in his eyes. "Well, and how wags the world with you, child? I saw someone the other day who was mighty concerned about you, Margery."

"And who may that be, sir, pray?" inquired Margery, tilting her chin.

"Oh, just a poor devil of a patient of mine; Edward Frith—you know Edward? He's in a regular stew over some notion he has about designing folks trying to take advantage of you, my dear."

"I can't think what concern it is of his," returned the girl, and her voice was both sharp and cold.

"No concern at all, indeed," replied Dr. May heartily. "I told him he was a fool for his pains. One would think the lad had enough to do thinking of his own troubles. There he lies, flat on his back, in a regular rat-hole of a place, with a double fracture in his leg, and with only a half-witted old crone to look after him. It's my belief he'll half-starve now he can't fend for himself."

"Starve!" echoed Margery in a startled tone.

"Dear, yes," said the doctor unconcernedly. "I know I, for one, couldn't eat such messes as the old

hag brings him; even if the very sight of the room he lies in wasn't enough to take away one's appetite. The plaster is dropping from the ceiling, the paper is mouldering on the walls—the dust and dirt everywhere — faugh! 'tis enough to turn a body sick."

"But why doesn't he look after his house better?" cried Margery, with sparkling eyes; "he oughtn't to let himself be put upon—he ought to see that the place is kept clean."

"My dear, it takes a woman to look after things," responded her old friend, still in a tone of placid unconcern. "There are no womenfolk at Moorside Farm, and Edward doesn't seem disposed to bring a wife there."

"Why not?" inquired she, blushing, she knew not why.

"Because he is too poor, my love," answered the old man deliberately. "And too proud," he added, after a moment's pause.

Margery gazed at him for a moment reflectively.

"But he needn't starve for all that," she said presently. "Somebody ought to send him a few dainties while he is laid up."

"To be sure," agreed the doctor blandly.

"And some friend might surely look round the place from time to time to see that he was a bit more comfortable?" she suggested, with some diffidence.

"A very good notion indeed," said Dr. May,

with an inscrutable face; "but the mischief is, poor Frith doesn't seem to have any friends."

He paused, rubbing his chin meditatively for a moment or two, and then added carelessly—

"Your father, poor good man, was about the only friend he had."

"Well, there'd be no harm in my sending him a few bits of things to pick at," said Margery. "It seems sad for the young man to be so neglected, and I'm sure if my dear father were alive he'd want to pay him some little attention. There's a cold fowl in the house now, which we were to have to-morrow, and grandma's made a batch of bun-loaves, and there's a griddle-cake of my own baking—I'll pack a little basket for him and send it by Rob."

Without waiting for an answer she ran to the window, imperatively summoning her head-man. Dr. May followed her more leisurely, and presently Rob came shambling across the yard in answer to her summons.

"Rob, I want you to take a basket to Moorside Farm this afternoon, and leave it for Mr. Frith with my respects, and I hope he's better."

"Better?" returned Rob, with an exaggerated assumption of surprise; "what's amiss wi' him?"

Dr. May eyed him sharply: why did the fellow assume ignorance of an accident about which the whole country was talking? In truth it was one of those blunders into which the over-cunning sometimes suffer themselves to be betrayed.

"Why, Rob, you must be wool-gathering," returned his young mistress. "You know very well that Mr. Frith has broke his leg—his man was telling us all about it yesterday, and I'd heard of it before, though I don't know yet how it happened."

"I can tell you how it happened," said the doctor, keeping his eyes fixed, however, on Rob's face. "You know the bridle-path across the moor? Everyone knows it; man and beast, I believe, could find their way along it blindfold. Well, three nights agone, when Edward Frith was riding along in the dark, his horse entangled its legs in a rope which was stretched across that beaten track, and fell, and rolled over on Edward."

"A rope!" ejaculated Margery; "but how could a rope get there?"

"To my mind it looks as if it had been tied on each side by a pair of hands," said the doctor grimly, "but Edward thinks that is not likely. He thinks some animal was tethered there, and got the rope entangled in its wanderings, and then broke loose."

"Very like," chimed in Rob eagerly, "very like indeed."

His voice was unsteady, his face amost livid; he shifted uneasily from one foot to the other. Had it not been for her preoccupation about the tidings themselves, Margery must have noticed the oddity of her serving-man's demeanour.

"Well, one thing you may be sure of," said the doctor, buttoning his coat,—"the beast that did it

will be found. No fear of that—he'll be tracked sooner or later, and sternly dealt with. If he's a wise beast he'll lie low."

"La! how viciously you say it," cried Margery, laughing. "It meant no mischief, poor dumb thing!"

"It meant mischief," retorted the old man; "and it had better be dumb," he added enigmatically, as Rob slouched away.

"Remember to take the basket with you," cried the girl; "it will only take you a very little bit out of your way."

The doctor remained staring after the miller's retreating figure, and ruminating.

"I think he'll keep quiet for a bit," he said to himself, "and there seems to be no sign of the other chap. Now, shall I deliver my lecture, or shall I proceed with my new little plan? Faith, I believe we are plotters all. I think I'll hold my warning in reserve; least said soonest mended, after all—my interference might spoil the other pretty affair."

"Poor Edward will thank you kindly," he said aloud. "He's so accustomed to be set aside and overlooked, that your little attention will indeed be a pleasant surprise. Now, I tell you what, Margery, my dear——"

"What?" inquired she, as he paused.

The doctor was looking at her very oddly.

"I'm not going to keep that healthy fellow long in bed," he said; "'twould kill him. I'll have him out of that ramshackle room of his next week. It would be very kind if you and your grandmother

would pay him a little visit. The time must hang heavy on his hands."

"I have a copy of the *Times* newspaper here," said Margery, "which Parson sent father only a week before he died. It tells of a great battle—I daresay 'twould entertain Mr. Frith to read of it."

"I daresay it would indeed," said the doctor; "and he would be vastly honoured by a visit from you and Mrs. Tickell. And you might be able to drop a hint or two to that useless old housekeeper, you know."

"I might," agreed Margery.

"She'll do it," said Dr. May to himself as he turned from the window. "Well, my dear, good-day to you. I am glad to find you looking so bonny, and getting on so well in spite of your loss. 'Tis what your poor father would have wished."

Tears sprang to the girl's eyes.

"Ah, sir," she cried, "it is sadly lonely without him. Do what I will I miss him at every turn."

"True, true," answered he sympathetically; "but life is not all sad, child. As I said to poor Edward the other day, life is not all sad even to the old. As for you, with your golden youth and all its possibilities before you, why——"

"Why what?" inquired she, as he paused; "what is the end, doctor?"

"That you must find out," quoth he, pinching her cheek.

He was riding away in high good-humour with

himself and the world, when, just as he turned out of the mill-yard, he came upon a young gentleman sauntering towards the gate. A very fine young gentleman in very fine clothes, who cast a kind of proprietary glance round the snug homestead as he approached it.

"Your servant, Mr. Westacre," said the doctor, pulling up short.

"Ah, good-day, Dr. May. Nobody ill at the mill, I hope?"

"Nay, I have but been to pay my respects to Miss Margery."

"Just what I am about to do," said Harry. "Don't let me keep you, doctor; the wind blows chill round this corner."

"You are cool enough, young jackanapes, I'll wager," muttered the old man between his teeth as he jogged on.

In a few minutes he turned to look after the receding figure.

"I don't like that so much," he said. "I don't like that at all."

The brilliant spring weather, with its sunshine and showers, its blue skies and piercing winds, was productive of quite a little harvest for the doctor. Severe colds, unlooked-for chills abounded in the neighbourhood, and he had not completed his rounds until late in the evening. In spite of this, however, he turned out of his way to ride for some distance along the moorland track which

had proved so disastrous to his friend Farmer Frith.

The light was waning when he reached the spot on which the accident had occurred, but he dismounted and carefully examined the place.

He had himself taken the precaution to cut the rope which formed so dangerous a pitfall to the unwary, but the original knots were still intact, and he investigated them closely.

"'Twas a very clever goat that tied that," he remarked, straightening himself at last. "A sailor's knot, no less. By George, the beast would make a fortune at a fair! Ha!—What's this?"

Under the furze-bush which he had been examining he had caught sight of a small object, and immediately possessed himself of it. It was a tinder-box, a common, battered thing enough, but the doctor put it carefully in his pocket.

"The goat was not so clever after all," he said aloud, chuckling. "I'll keep my own counsel over this. I won't even tell Edward. The thing will come in handy, no doubt, some day; and meanwhile 'least said soonest mended,' as I remarked to that saucy wench."

He had remounted and proceeded some distance on his way when the sound of wheels caused him to raise his meditative eyes, and he descried a waggon lumbering towards him through the dusk. In a few minutes he came near enough to identify the driver, who was seated negligently on the shaft with his legs dangling.

"It's you, Rob, is it?" cried he, drawing rein. "Well, did you leave the basket at Moorside Farm?"

"I left it right enough," returned Rob, with a note of spiteful triumph in his voice, "but I hadn't turned my 'orse round afore it were thrown back at me. Th' owd lass yonder come runnin' out wi't, and said her master was much obliged to Miss Burchell, but he didn't need no victuals."

He was for jogging on again, but the doctor stopped him.

"Hold hard for a minute, sirrah; I'll be bound you didn't leave the right message."

"I left no message at all," cried Rob sulkily. "I handed in the basket same as Miss Burchell told me. I never said naught nobbut when t'owd woman axed who 'twere from." He had pushed his hat sideways, and scratched his head with an air of assumed stupidity. "Did our missus say I were to say summat?" he inquired after a pause.

"You rascal!" growled Dr. May, and he whipped up his own horse without deigning another word to the miller.

"Confound it all!" he muttered to himself. "The girl should have known better than to trust to such a messenger. If you want to do a kindness, do it yourself, say I. As for that fool, Edward, I've no patience with him and his stupid pride."

CHAPTER V

"Your appetite is to be light
Of love, I well espy.
For like as ye have said to me,
Is likewise hardely
Ye would answer whoever it were
In way of company.
It is said of old, Soon hot, soon cold:
And so is a woman."

"He was a lovely youth! I guess
The panther in the wilderness
Was not so fair as he."

JENNY, Jenny!"

Margery stood on the top of the broad, shallow oak stairs, polished by the feet of many generations, lustily calling. She was very fine indeed in the rustling silk which she had donned in obedience to a mandate from her grandmother when Mr. Harry Westacre had paid his ceremonious call. He had sat long in the best parlour, making himself very agreeable and saying many kind and sympathetic things; he had even partaken of the refreshment which Dr. May had refused, swallowing Margery's cowslip wine without so much as a wry face. But now he was gone, and it behoved that thrifty damsel to lose no time in doffing the costly

raiment destined only to be worn on occasions of importance.

"Jenny!" she called again, "Jenny, come and unlace me! What art thou doing, lass?"

"Comin', mistress, comin'," responded a shrill voice from the back regions; and presently Jenny came clattering upstairs in her thick shoes.

"What wast thou doing, making me wait so long?" said Margery, turning to step into her big, airy chamber, which looked so clean and cool with its uncarpeted floor and dimity hangings. The lattice was wide open, and prudent Jenny would have drawn it to had not Margery impatiently interfered—

"Let it be, lass—the fresh air won't harm me! I'm hot enough."

The flush on her cheeks lent additional lustre to her bright eyes; the inky hue of the state gown seemed to throw up the radiance of her beauty. Jenny gazed at her admiringly.

"Ah, sure yo' are hot. Yo'r face is jist same as a posy of flowers. I see'd Mester Harry lookin' at yo' hard when I took in the tray."

"Nonsense!" cried Margery.

"'Tisn't nonsense though. A body can't help havin' eyes in their head. And Dolly noticed the way t'yoong squire was lookin' back at the house at arter he went through the yard. She was sayin' it to me jist now."

"I wish you and Dolly wouldn't gossip about me

and my affairs," returned Miss Burchell, not very angrily, however; "I suppose that was what you were doing instead of attending to me when I called. There, begin and unlace me."

Jenny stooped over her task without speaking, knowing full well that encouragement to continue her tale would presently be forthcoming.

"I don't think Mr. Westacre looked particularly hard at me," pursued Margery, after Jenny had with great precision drawn the lace through three eyelet-holes; but she made the statement rather in an inquiring than in an assertive tone.

"Well, perhaps yo' didn't chance to notice," rejoined the handmaid with mock simplicity, 'but it seemed so to me."

The lace went whistling through a few more holes, and then Margery spoke again.

"And so Dolly fancied she saw the young squire looking back? Come," as Jenny did not at once reply, "you may as well tell me, though I am sure 'tis but her foolishness."

"Well," said Jenny, pausing with the tag of the lace poised aloft, "Dolly says she couldn't help watchin' Mester Harry, seein' what a fine figure of a young gentleman he is, and she see'd him turn at the gate and look back for quite a while——"

"Nay, did she really?"

"Ah, she did, mistress. And she said she see'd the lace frill of his shirt puff reet out wi' the great big sigh he gave."

"Oh, Jenny, that is a silly tale!"

"'Tis a true tale though. She come reet in an' towd me. Says she, 'There'll be bells ringin' afore aught's long.'"

"Bells! What bells?"

"Weddin' bells, Miss Margery. Ah, sure, they'll be ringin'. Yo' must know yo'rsel' 'twas summat particular as made Mester Harry drop in so friendly and bide so long. Now what do you think Dolly and me done to make sure which way the land lay?"

"What, you've been up to some mischief, I know," cried Margery in real alarm. "You've never had the impudence to say anything to Mr. Westacre?"

"Lord sakes, no, miss! Dolly and me has both more sense. Dolly nobbut fetched her Bible and we cut in it for a token, and theer, if you'll believe me, reet under her thumb was the words 'In heaven there's neither marryin' nor givin' in marriage.' Theer, I should think that p'ints out pretty plain that theer's to be marryin' on *earth*."

Margery was struck by the coincidence; it did not occur to her that Dolly's well-thumbed volume might be likely to fall open almost automatically at such texts as could be supposed to prognosticate speedy matrimony.

"Madam Westacre," soliloquised Jenny, "Madam Harry Westacre—that'll be yo're name, an' it has a fine sound to't."

Margery laughed and tossed her head.

"You're going a bit too quick, wench," she observed. "I doubt the young squire has no such thought."

"What made his shirt-frill go flutterin' that way for, then?" retorted Jenny.

Further discussion of the subject was prevented by Mrs. Tickell, whose irate voice now came booming up the stairs.

"Jenny! Wheer art thou—thou idle little hussy? Art never comin' to thy spinnin'?"

"There—run down—I can manage the rest for myself," said Margery hastily.

Jenny relinquished the lace, but turned at the door.

"It's yo' as is missus, when all's said an' done," she cried rebelliously. "If yo' want me to wait on yo' other folks has no right to barge. I'd not put up with it if I was yo'—yo' as'll soon be howdin' up yo'r head wi' ony lady i' the lond."

Margery held her head high enough when she presently entered the living-room, and seated herself behind her spinning-wheel with as much dignity as was compatible with her short linen skirts. Her grandmother sat opposite to her, busily at work at her own particular wheel, and Dolly and Jenny plied their more homely distaffs in silence. A fire of logs burnt in the wide hearth, for though it was spring the evenings were still chilly; the falling together of these logs, and the flickering of the flames, were the only sounds in the room except the continuous hum of Mrs. Tickell's spinning-wheel, to

which Margery's made but a fitful accompaniment. She broke her thread frequently, and sometimes, forgetting her task, sat with her hands in her lap.

Madam Harry Westacre! What a strange notion to come into Jenny's head! Had the young squire indeed looked hard at her, and was there any foundation for Dolly's fancy about the shirt-frill? Pooh!—'twas folly to think of it—he was the Squire's son, and the Westacres were a proud race. But what was that he had himself told her about his father? That he had lost him in a far more painful way than she had lost hers. They were not on speaking terms he had said—from henceforth they were to be strangers to each other—that might, of course, make a difference. But still, would such a grand young gentleman ever consent to live at the mill?

Mrs. Tickell interrupted her meditations at this point. Though she stood in some awe of the Burchell spirit, as exemplified in Margery, it did not hinder her from grumbling.

"Well, I'm sure, it's well thou'rt not dependin' on thy own spinnin' for thy weer, else I doubt thou'd go as naked as Mother Eve! Yo've broke yo'r thread twenty times I'm sure, an' yo' don't make up for it by workin' a bit 'arder between whiles."

Margery pushed away her wheel.

"I'm not going to spin any more to-night," she cried. "There's no need for me to work at all unless I choose."

"Nay, theer's no need, but I reckon thy poor feyther 'ud noan ha' liked sich wool-gatherin' ways —him as used to call thee his notable little wench when thou was but a child."

Margery's face softened, as it always did when her father was mentioned, and drawing her wheel towards her again she began to spin meekly and with great assiduity. After supper, indeed, she sat down to her task again, much to her grandmother's astonishment. That good woman had put away hers for the night, and now sat toasting her slippered feet at the fire in great ease and good-humour.

"Grandma," said Margery, lifting her head presently, "do you mind the night before poor father died—the night I came home?"

"Eh, dear, I'm not like to forget it, child? What about it?"

"Do you remember his saying he was going to pick a husband for me himself?"

"Yigh, I do indeed; an' I could wish the poor man had ha' lived to do it!"

"Do you think he had anybody in his mind for me?" said Margery, resting her chin in her hands and looking earnestly at the elder woman.

Her eyes shone in the firelight; her white teeth seemed to gleam between her parted lips. Mrs. Tickell reflected for a moment or two.

"No, I can't call to mind as he did," she returned presently. "Summat did pass between us about Ed'ard Frith, but whether 'twas yo'r father named

him, or me, I can't jist call to mind. I know yo'r father thought high o' the yoong man. They see'd a deal of each other the last two year—he used to coom to yo'r father for advice an' that—but he reckoned he'd be too stiff-necked for the sitooation."

"Stiff-necked!" exclaimed the girl.

"Ah, as I said to feyther, Ed'ard Frith isn't one to fancy playin' second fiddle."

Margery was silent for a moment, then—

"He must be a very disagreeable man," she said decidedly.

"Dear o' me, I wonder what thou says that for!" said the old woman in a scandalised tone. "I'm sure Ed'ard Frith is as quiet, respectable, civil a yoong chap as yo' could look to meet onywhere."

"Civil!" cried Margery. "It wasn't very civil of him to send back the few oddments we sent him when Dr. May asked us. He might have said 'thank you' anyhow."

"Well, that's true, he met have said 'thank you'; 'twouldn't have hurt him to do that mich."

"I should think not, indeed. Dr. May was very anxious we should go and see him—you and me, grandma."

"Was he?" said Mrs. Tickell, somewhat drowsily; she frequently became somnolent in the after supper hour.

"Yes, indeed. But I am sure I don't know that I want to see him—unless to oblige Dr.

May — I shouldn't like to go against Dr. May."

"Nay, nay," murmured Mrs. Tickell, "it 'ud be a pity to go again Dr. May."

"I wonder what sort of face he'd make if we did go," cried Margery, with a little laugh. "He'd be a bit ashamed of himself, I should think."

But Mrs. Tickell's head had fallen forward, and she made no reply.

Margery, too, became silent, but her thoughts continued busy. Mr. Harry Westacre was not the only man in the world; she felt some curiosity to see this other youth whom her father had thought well of, who had even been his friend, but who was stiff-necked. Stiff-necked, indeed. Perhaps somebody would manage to bend that neck of his some day.

CHAPTER VI

"With laughter swimming in thine eye,
That told youth's heartfelt revelry;
And motion changeful as the wing,
Of swallow waken'd by the Spring;
With accents blithe as voice of May,
Chanting glad Nature's roundelay.
. . . . . .
Thy image such, in former time,
When thou just entering on thy prime,
And women's sense in thee combined,
Gently with childhood's simplest mind,
First taught'st my sighing soul to move,
With hope towards the heaven of love."

EDWARD had been carried by his two men into another room, on the same floor as his bedroom, and lay on an improvised couch on the window-seat, looking very haggard and gaunt, but newly shaven and neat. He was fastidious regarding his apparel, which, though worn and shabby enough, was invariably whole and well-brushed. Indeed, he had insisted on old Molly bringing him his garments before leaving his bed that he might himself brush them.

In truth, however, neatness and cleanliness were strictly confined to his own person. The room in which he was now installed was as unkempt as his

bedroom; dust and disorder reigned everywhere, a mouldy odour of damp and decay was distinctly perceptible in spite of the open windows. With the exception of the table wheeled up close to the window-seat, on which lay a few books dusted by his own hand, everything that the apartment contained was grimy.

He had just, with an expression of disgust, pushed away from him the battered tin tray on which Molly had set forth a mug of most uninviting mutton-broth, when his attention was attracted by the sound of wheels in the yard without, and, craning his head, he saw a comfortable-looking gig draw up immediately beneath his window, and two female figures presently alight.

"Is there anyone there to hold the horse?" cried a fresh voice—a voice round and full, with youth in every note of it.

Edward withdrew his head suddenly, but not before he had taken note of the face beneath the broad-brimmed straw hat, and guessed its identity. The doctor had not exaggerated—that face was indeed tinted like a blush-rose.

"La, my dear!" cried Mrs. Tickell, "dunnot, for goodness' sake, leave me here alone wi' the horse! I couldn't never hold the creetur'."

"Is there nobody there?" cried Margery again.

Then Edward thrust his head through the window—

"I am so sorry not to be able to come out," he

cried, "but I am tied here by the leg, and I much fear me there is nobody about."

The broad-brimmed hat was tilted up, and Edward had his first view of the blue eyes described by his old friend; there was fire in them indeed, but also —or so it seemed to him—kindly laughter.

"Then you are at home, Mr. Frith?" said Margery. "My grandmother and I have come to pay you a visit. Since you are tied by the leg I presume it is out of your power to shut your door in our faces."

Edward coloured to the roots of his hair.

"I hope I should not in any case be so unmannerly as to do that," said he; but his eyes fell, remembering his recent repulse of her favours. "Will not the horse stand?" he continued in a very small voice. "Couldn't you make shift to tie him up? My old housekeeper would stand by his head, but I fear it would be no use to ask her to hold him."

"Dear o' me, nay, Margery child; I'm sure we could never think o' sich a thing. The honest woman would be free'tened to death, and well she might be, for that there horse is a reg'lar wild beast, Mr. Frith. I can never think why my granddarter keeps it—'tis a treecherous animal too, as——"

"Is your stable open, sir?" interrupted Margery. "I'll soon put him up myself if that's all."

"Oh, it's open," returned Edward, with an unmirthful laugh. "There is nothing to steal here,

Miss Burchell, I assure you. But, really, I am ashamed that you should have so much trouble."

"Don't you want us to come in, then?" inquired she, puckering up her pretty brow.

"Oh, indeed I do," responded he, with so much warmth and eagerness that she was convinced, and, with a whisk of her skirts, turned round to set about her self-imposed task.

"Now, grandma, catch hold of the shaft, that's all you need do, and there's naught to be frightened at. Just hold it steady while I unbuckle the harness."

"Eh, dear, but I'm afeerd o' the beast," protested Mrs. Tickell. "It'll bite—I know it'll bite; and what a wicked, rollin' eye it's got! I know it's up to mischeef!"

But Margery merely laughed, and adjured her relative to hold him tight, and presently the bay horse was led forth with his traces knotted up in workmanlike fashion, and conducted across the yard and into the stable on the other side.

"May he have a mouthful of hay to pick at?" she called out presently from the stable door.

"He may have everything in the world he fancies," returned the young farmer, with a fervour surprising to himself.

Margery disappeared, and presently came forth again, picking her steps across the cobble-stones. Edward noticed that she wore little, sandled shoes, and stockings with embroidered clocks.

"Molly!" he cried, drawing in his head and shouting vigorously. "Molly, here is company at the door! Go down at once and let the ladies in!"

But whether Molly were really out of hearing, or whether, conscious of the deficiencies in her appearance, she was in hiding somewhere, she paid no heed to her master's summons; and he was obliged to look forth again and request his visitors humbly and apologetically to walk in and find their way upstairs.

"Eh, what a dirty place!" ejaculated Mrs. Tickell, bunching up her skirts as she crossed the hall. "I declare a body could grow 'taters on these stairs!"

"He has nobody to do for him, poor fellow," said Margery compassionately.

"There's no need for him to live in a pig-sty, though," responded her grandmother tartly. "I've no patience with the chap. Why doesn't he get wed? 'Tis what everyone says."

"This way, if you please," called the farmer's voice, as he heard them halt on the head of the stairs. Following the sound, the visitors soon found themselves in his presence. Mrs. Tickell, crossing the room, shook him by the hand, while Margery, standing just within the door, dropped a demure curtsey.

Edward was flushed and excited, his eyes bright under their dark brows.

"Curse this leg of mine," he cried. "I can't so much as get up to offer you a chair."

Stretching out his arm, however, he drew one towards him, set it at a convenient angle, frowning as he saw its condition; then, drawing forth his handkerchief, he fell to dusting it.

"'Tis scarce fit to offer you," he said. "Poor old Molly was never much good, and of late years she does nothing at all. But she was my nurse, and my father's before me, and as long as she is above ground she must bide here."

Margery came forward now, drawing up a chair; but instead of seating herself, she stood by, watching her host's efforts with an amused countenance.

"Lud! How awkward the man is!" she exclaimed, laughing. "You were never meant to do such work, Mr. Frith. Give me your duster—why, it is a handkerchief! Fie, what a use to put it to! But since you have begun I may as well finish. There,"—passing it quickly over the seat and back, —"grandma, sit down. Now, we must put mine to rights,"—repeating the process with her own chair. "What a mess we have made of your handkerchief! You must have a clean one. Pray, where do you keep your linen, Mr. Frith?"

"There is a cupboard just outside the door," stammered he; "but pray, Miss Burchell, don't take the trouble——"

"Nay, but you must have a clean handkerchief," she cried, and was out of the room in a moment.

"She is but just home from school, sir," explained Mrs. Tickell apologetically. "There's been no time

to train her, what wi' her poor father deein' an' all; but she'll learn better manners in time. She doesn't mean to be forward."

"Indeed I should never think her so," returned Edward, whose eyes were on the door.

Presently Margery came back.

"I have found the handkerchief, but oh, Mr. Frith, what a state your clothes are in! Have you no one to mend for you? 'Tis heart-rending to see the good linen so neglected. Does not your old Molly so much as sew on a button for you?"

"I can sew on my buttons myself when I'm driven to it," returned he, with a laugh, though he reddened. "Molly is nearly blind, poor old soul."

"I vow I've a mind to see to it myself," cried Margery. "We could soon put things to rights for you. 'Tis a sin and a shame that any poor man should be so neglected, and him my father's friend. Couldn't we take home a bundle of things, grandma, and fetch 'em back in a day or two?"

"I reckon Mr. Frith 'ud rather his own housekeeper attended to him," said Mrs. Tickell, sitting bolt upright, and looking very stiff and starched.

Edward's eyes had momentarily lit up with pleasure and gratitude, but at the elder woman's words his face clouded over, and he answered, ungraciously enough, that he could not think of giving anyone so much trouble.

"I declare I have no patience with you," cried

Margery. "I believe you like having everything at sixes and sevens."

Whether actuated by the spirit of contradiction, or from mere curiosity to see how far she could go, or because she was in truth anxious to improve his plight, Margery was determined to carry her point.

"I mean to straighten up your house for you," she said audaciously, "and I will begin by mending your clothes. You are tied by the leg, you know; you can't prevent me taking them home, and I don't suppose old Molly will."

She was out of the room before he could remonstrate, and through the open door he could hear her rummaging among the shelves. Presently a light foot fell upon the stairs, and the house-door opened and closed. In a moment or two she reappeared, laughing and triumphant.

"I've put a good bundle in the gig," she cried. "Now, sir, who's won the day?"

"You have, indeed," returned he, and there was a sudden unexpected gentleness in his look and tone. "I own myself conquered, and can only say I am grateful for your goodness."

"'Tis but a small matter," interrupted Mrs. Tickell loftily. "One of the lasses can soon mend 'em up. They haven't so mich to do of an afternoon."

Edward looked blank again, and Margery hastily rejoined—

"Nay, but I'm going to see to these myself,

grandma. Now, I fear we are keeping you from your dinner, Mr. Frith. What have you here? Broth? Won't you drink it before it gets cold?"

"I thank you; I've no mind to drink it," replied he. "A man has not much appetite lying on his back all day."

Margery, meanwhile, had been examining the mug, and discovered that the compound within was thickly coated with grease. Without a word she caught it up, and again disappeared.

"I must beg you to excuse her, sir," cried Mrs. Tickell in a vexed tone. "I canna think what's come to the lass to-day—she's fair off her head."

"I think 'tis her good heart which makes her sorry for me," said Edward, speaking, however, in the tone of one who reasons with himself.

"I'm sure I'm quite ashamed of her," resumed the other. "Runnin' about the house and that, and makin' herself so mich at home."

Now, as has been noted, Edward had coloured more than once since the arrival of his guests, but somehow or other this innocent remark of Mrs. Tickell's caused him to flush with quite unprecedented violence; his face burnt indeed as though it would never cool again, and his eyes sought the ground, and he looked altogether so strange that Mrs. Tickell found herself unable to remove her astonished gaze from him.

It was a relief to both when Margery entered, bearing aloft a delicate china cup, and holding in

the other hand a plate of the same pattern, on which were set forth some crisp, nicely-browned strips of toast.

"There!" she cried, setting them before Edward, "the stuff will taste better out of that cup, I'll wager. I found it in the buttery; and I found Molly there, too, hiding from us!"—here she burst out laughing. "Oh, I've had a talk with Molly—I gave her a bit of my mind, and she was quite good-humoured, and promised to do better in the future. I told her a sick man has no stomach for his food unless it be nicely served; and I showed her how to skim the soup, and told her to put a few vegetables in it to-morrow—there must be plenty of vegetables in your garden, surely? And then I gave her a lesson in toast-making. And I told her she must put a cloth on that ugly tray, and always use decent china. Well, are you going to drink your broth, sir? I suppose you will not be too proud since it came out of your own kitchen. That reminds me I am very much offended with you."

"Pray, don't be offended," cried he, looking ashamed and remorseful. How could he have been such an unmannerly churl as to refuse this sunny, gracious creature's gifts?

"But I am. You wouldn't eat my fowl, nor grandma's bun-loaf—nor the griddle-cake I made myself."

"Did you really make it?" groaned he penitently. "Oh, I am sorry."

"Well, if you are sorry, you have my forgiveness," she returned blithely. "I may even send you another, provided you are duly grateful."

"I assure you," he returned humbly, "I shall be grateful for even a crumb."

"'Pon my word," ejaculated Mrs. Tickell, who was not remarkable for tact, "you seem to be goin' pretty quick, Margery, what wi' mendin' for Farmer Frith, and cookin' for him—I doubt you'll be doin' for him altogether soon."

Thereupon Margery whisked round with a little stamp of the foot.

"What rubbish you do talk, grandma!" she cried sharply.

And Edward felt very uncomfortable, and wished with all his heart he had not said he would be grateful for a crumb. Did it not seem like putting in for gifts which he had no mind to receive except for the donor's sake?

He was so stiff and constrained in his manner after this, that Margery found it impossible to maintain her own light gaiety. Rising, presently, she declared it was time for them to be going.

"You'd best come out with me, grandma," she added. "You can hold up the shafts while I put the horse in."

"Won't you wait a bit?" said Edward, with a sinking heart. "One of the men is sure to be back soon. I don't like you doing such things for yourself."

Margery made no answer beyond extending her hand with a curt "Good-bye." He glanced at her with unconscious appeal, but dropped the hand coldly.

"Now then, granny," said the girl, marching out of the room.

He heard the rattling of the gig as she drew it over the cobble-stones, and the clatter of the horse's feet when led forth from the stable. In a very short time the sound of retreating wheels fell on his ear, and he was unable to resist the temptation of looking out. Margery had led the horse through the gate, and now, turning, sent this gate swinging back on its hinges. She looked up as she did so, and their eyes met.

She was very silent during the homeward drive, irritation being at war with compassion. Edward Frith was certainly a very unmannerly fellow, without a word to throw at a dog, it seemed, much less at a winsome young woman, yet she could not forget that look in his eyes, nor yet how pale and drawn his face had looked as she had last seen it, framed by the battered window-frame.

CHAPTER VII

FOR some reason or other Margery slept ill that night, but rose on the following morning full of virtuous resolutions. Why should she bother her head by thinking either of the man whom her father had fancied might be a suitable match for her, and who, to be sure, was living in such discomfort that it was only common charity to wish that some change might come in his lot, or about Mr. Harry Westacre, who, however much he might admire her in a friendly and passing way, would never so far forget what was due to his rank as to think of marrying her. Margery did not know that she was in a hurry to be married; her hands were full enough as they were. After all, she was mistress inside and out, or rather, as she had told her father, master—she wanted no usurper of her authority. As she sat on the side of her bed, dangling her little feet over the uncarpeted floor, she told herself she had not hitherto sufficiently asserted herself. She must look after things more closely herself, take the lead, prove to her servants and the world at large that she was indeed master. Armed with many doughty resolves,

she came downstairs, and going out of the house entered the mill. Rob and his subordinates had been at work for an hour or more. Picking up her already short skirts, and pursing up her lips with a critical air, she made a survey of the premises; Rob stalking behind her in a silence that was half-sulky and half-amused. All was in perfect order, the head-man having, indeed, lately redoubled in diligence with a view to futhering his own suit in case that of his confederate should fail. When she came downstairs after completing her survey, she paused with a condescending air; her locks were slightly powdered with flour, and her wakeful night caused her to look paler than usual, so that she had a somewhat ethereal appearance that morning.

"Everything seems to be going on very well."

Rob's eyes twinkled under their flour-whitened brows.

"I'm fain to hear yo' say so," he rejoined; then, laughing outright, "I wonder if yo'd find out if they wasn't going on reet."

"Rob," cried she, "what do you mean by saying such a thing? Of course I should know. I'm not a fool!"

The giant grinned.

"Yo' metn't be a fool an' yet yo' metn't know mich o' the workin's of a mill," he said. "Lasses can't know onythin' about that. 'Tis men's work."

"You shouldn't be impertinent," replied his

mistress, beginning to walk towards the house with an offended air.

"Nay, I don't mean no offence, missus. I'm fair tickled at the way yo've been goin' on. Orderin' me up an' down to begin wi'—d'ye mind that day ye sent me to fetch the wheat fro' Upton? Theer weren't no occasion to fetch the wheat that day, but 'Go at once when I tell yo'' and 'Go yo'rsel'' says yo'. Well, there the sacks lie jist as I fetched 'em—not touched yet; there was no need to touch 'em—I had to get forrard wi' the oats first. But yo' never found it out—yo'n never put yo'r nose inside the mill this week past."

Margery reddened with anger. "I was busy in other ways," she returned. "I had my own reasons, and I think it is very wrong of you not to grind the wheat when I took the trouble of sending you to fetch it. And I think you are really very impudent to-day, Rob. I don't know why you are talking to me like this."

"I'm not talkin' for no harm," growled Rob. "'Tis as well yo' should know how mich depends on me. Thot's all. Yo'r feyther thought the warld o' me, an' yo'd be in a bad way yo'rsel', missus, if Rob Rigby weren't at your elbow. Yo' leave the workin' o' the mill to me an' it 'ull go on reet. I were yo'r feyther's reet-hand mon."

"Well, of course we all know that," said Margery, puzzled, and somewhat taken aback by his aggressive tone.

"It 'ud be well if yo' behaved same as if yo' did know it then," grumbled Rob. "What brings yo' out o' yo'r bed so early—gettin' yo'rsel' all of a mess wi' flour, wi'out yo' think less of me then yo'r feyther did?"

"I never said I was not satisfied with you," returned Margery, with as brave an assumption of dignity as she could muster, "but being your mistress I must occasionally see to things for myself."

With that she walked away, feigning not to hear the derisive laugh with which the man returned to the mill. He had not at first meant to be impertinent, intending merely to advance his own claims on her respect and regard, but as the colloquy had proceeded, his naturally surly temper had asserted itself, and his manner and look might indeed have called for severe reproach. But the truth of his remarks, and the discovery of her own incompetence and ignorance, had so much humiliated Margery that she was incapable of reprimanding him as he deserved.

Mrs. Tickell surprised her by appearing at breakfast with a handkerchief tied tightly round her head in lieu of a mob-cap, her skirts tucked up unwontedly high beneath a check overall.

"We are whitewashing to-day," she said, in reply to her granddaughter's query. "We are turnin' out the kitchen, and the men 'ull get a'gate directly after breakfast."

"I didn't know," said Margery, with some sense of injury. "I think you might have told me, grandma."

"Towd you!" cried the old woman. "What dost thou want tellin' for? Doesn't thou know spring cleanin' has to be seen to this year same as other years? Chimbleys was swept yesterday, an' whitewashin' starts to-day. We's get walls rubbed down an' beds shook out next week. Here, gie us thy basin for thy porridge."

Margery pushed forward the blue-and-white basin, still with an air of offended dignity.

"I do think, grandma, you ought to have told me when you were going to begin the housecleaning. After all—I am—I am—the house belongs to me, and I think I ought to be consulted."

"Thou'rt missus—that's what thou wants to say, I reckon. Well——" Here Mrs. Tickell drew a long breath and began to pucker up her face.

"No, no; I never meant to say I was mistress," cried Margery in alarm. "I only thought you might have mentioned it—that's all."

"Mentioned it!" ejaculated Mrs. Tickell, who was fumbling with the strings of her overall. "I'd as soon think o' mentioning washin'-day. Your poor feyther, as is gone to his long home, 'ud never have cast up at me that road. Of course I never reckoned to be missus here—never. I never was set up, nor took nothin' on mysel', but I think it ill

Margery stood looking down at him, uncomfortably conscious of her pink gingham dress, and of her ruffled hair. Presently she wondered how much ankle those short shirts of hers exposed to view, and began hastily to descend the ladder.

"Nay, don't come down," said Mr. Westacre. "I like to see you up there—I've been watching you for some minutes. Dusting china is a very becoming operation. Can't you let me help?"

Margery's face relaxed. Mr. Harry looked very young and very boyish this morning. They had been prim and proper enough yesterday, sitting in the best parlour, with grandma between them pouring out tea; Margery feeling stiff and grand in her best clothes, and Mr. Harry making so many bows and flourishes, and using such high-sounding words. But to-day it was different.

It was impossible to be formal when one was standing on top of a ladder, and a young man was looking up at one, eagerly pleading to be allowed to dust the china too.

"Well, I reckon you can if you like," she said. "I don't mind."

"Is this a clean duster? Yes—well, now let's begin. Oh, what a black saucer!"

"You oughtn't to do such dirty work, sir, you'll spoil your ruffles."

"No, no; it'll not hurt them. Nay, they don't look any the better for it I must own."

He held up a corner of filmy lace with a wry smile.

"Let me take the worst off first, and you can finish the job," said Margery. "There"—sweeping her duster deftly round another saucer. "You can give it a final polish, Mr. Harry."

"Yes, I like this notion very well. We are working together—that's what gives it a charm in my eyes. So—let me hold the saucer just where you held it. I can see the print of your little finger and thumb."

"I'm sure you can't indeed, sir. I'd be ashamed if I hadn't cleaned it better than that."

"Nay, then I must have guessed the exact spot. There's one thing which is a sharpener of wits they say. Have you ever heard of it, Miss Burchell?"

Margery reddened, but did not speak.

"Sure, you must have heard of it?" he continued. "'Tis a thing that comes to us all, sooner or later—a great thing—a mighty thing. It laughs at locksmiths, it makes the world go round, and for all that it spells its name in four letters."

"You seem very much taken up with riddles to-day, Mr. Harry," returned the girl lightly, though her face was crimson. "Now, I think we have finished this job. I must go and boil the potatoes for dinner, for all the maids are busy."

"Boil potatoes!" ejaculated he.

"Yes—does that shock you?"

"Not at all, not at all. I think I like you better when you are making yourself so busy than when you receive me in state."

"It's pleasanter too," said Margery. "I was just thinking that." Meeting his meaning glance, she blushed in such charming confusion that Master Harry had much difficulty in refraining from encircling her trim waist with his arm. But in spite of the girl's simplicity, there was something about the miller's daughter which warned him that it would be unwise to proceed too fast. He contented himself, therefore, with handing her down from the ladder, and having accompanied her as far as the kitchen premises, departed, promising to call again soon.

Margery's face was pensive as she washed the potatoes. This man had come courting her on his own account. Dolly and Jenny were right—there was no mistaking his admiration. He knew his own mind, and evidently did not mean to let the grass grow under his feet; and poor Edward Frith, who had looked forth from his gloomy house with such a melancholy air—he could not so much as find a word to ask her to tarry, and he had watched her driving away without even waving his hand in farewell.

CHAPTER VIII

"The morn-wind is sweet 'mong the beds o' new flowers,
The wee birds sing kindlie an' hie;
Our gude-man leans owre his kale-yard dyke
And a blythe auld bodie is he."

DOCTOR MAY chanced to be jogging along the village street a day or two later, when he encountered Miss Burchell, who, with a small basket slung over her arm, was proceeding hastily in the opposite direction.

"Now then, little lass, whither away so fast?" he asked. "Nay, never look so taken aback. I declare I might be the Wolf and you might be Red Riding Hood—with your little basket and all! Where are you bound for?"

"I was just going to Maggie Formby's to ask if she would send one of her lads on an errand for me. We are spring-cleaning at home and everyone's busy."

"But what have you got in your basket, child? Eatables, I'll be bound! Do you think it's safe to trust a little lad with tempting dainties? Come, what have you got there, Margery?"

"Well, just a few little odds and ends which I reckon a sick man might fancy. To tell you the

truth, doctor, I was going to try once more to induce Farmer Frith to accept a little present from me."

The old gentleman smiled down at her benignly.

"A very kind thought, my love," he rejoined. "I'll wager the little attention will do more to restore my poor patient than any amount of the stuff I can give him."

"I'm not so sure—we tried once before, grandma and me, and he sent the things back without so much as a word of thanks."

"Ah, but Rob took them then, and Rob's a clumsy sort of fellow. Edward Frith is a bit thin-skinned —he'd resent anything that seemed like patronage. He's got foreign blood somewhere, and is mighty quick at taking offence."

"So I have found out," said Margery, with her nose in the air.

"I wonder now," pursued the doctor, "if the Formby lad will rub him up the wrong way too?"

"Oh, if you have so many doubts about it I'd best take my basket home again. I was but wishing to be neighbourly."

"Well, my dear, and 'tis very well done of you. But I tell you what would do more good to the poor fellow than all the kickshaws in the Squire's kitchen —a sight of your bonny face."

"Well, doctor, I did go the other day with grandma."

"Is that any reason for not coming again with

me? Now, I'll tell you what we'll do. We'll just trot back to your place and have your pillion strapped on Jerry here, and you can nip up behind the old doctor, as you've done many a time when you were a little lass, and we'll jog across the moor as comfortably as can be. He'll not refuse your dainties if you bring 'em yourself."

"I hardly like," said Margery; yet nevertheless she turned about and began to retrace her steps.

"Somebody else 'ull like though," rejoined the old man, chuckling, as he controlled Jerry's inclination to outstrip her. "T'other day I did but mention your name and he——"

"What did he say?" inquired the girl, making herself very busy in patting the horse's shining neck.

"Well, he didn't say much—'tisn't his way—but you should have seen the look in his face and his colour! My word, if he could see you every day I doubt we'd have him on his legs in no time."

The pillion was duly produced and affixed, and the quaintly matched friends set out together; the doctor taking charge of the basket in order to leave the girl more free to cling to him.

That was a very pleasant ride across the moor, and Margery's cheeks were flushed with the brisk air, and the unwonted exercise, to such an extent as to call forth the doctor's admiration when he assisted her to alight.

"Bless my heart, I never saw thee look better,

lass! 'Twill be like a breath of spring to the poor lad, mewed up as he is in that dull room."

"What a pity he can't get out," rejoined the girl; "such a lovely day too."

"Well, 'pon my life I've half a mind to try," cried the other; "'twould be pleasanter for you, too, than visiting him in that musty-smelling hole." He pulled out his watch. "'Tis just upon twelve. I fancy I could catch the lads before they go home to dinner. We'll throw a rug down under the south wall yonder in the garden. There's grass enough there; my word, 'tis hard to say what's meant to be grass and what's meant to be garden in this wilderness of a place! Find a sheltered corner, child, and I'll have him carried down in a minute or two."

Margery crossed the yard, and went round the house in the direction in which he had pointed, and after wandering round the tangled, over-grown garden, duly discovered the spot which the old man had mentioned. A sunny, sheltered spot, protected by a crumbling brick wall to which gnarled fruit-trees were clinging with a fidelity reminiscent of earlier and more prosperous days; they were now, indeed, sadly in need of pruning, but the profusion of young green shoots gave them a certain luxuriant beauty. A giant wisteria, planted at a considerable distance farther up the wall, had so out-grown the space allotted to it that its branches trailed over pear and plum, hanging its delicate clusters of blossoms amid vivid foliage which was not its own. The

grass did indeed grow thickly beneath the wall, but did not altogether manage to exclude polyanthuses and primroses, while even a few tulips forced their way upwards; forget-me-nots had sown themselves here and there among them, and had even found a footing in the crannies of the wall. It was a sweet, blooming corner, and though thrifty Margery clacked her tongue at the many evidences of waste, she could not but feel an unwilling satisfaction at its wild beauty.

By and by Dr. May came round the corner of the house, carrying a pillow or two and a couple of blankets.

They're bringing him down," he cried cheerfully; "but my gentleman must needs brush his hair first, and change his coat, when he heard what company was awaiting him. As I told him, he'll soon be as great a coxcomb as that other spark of thine, Master Westacre."

"Oh, sir, you surely did not couple my name with the young squire's to Farmer Frith? And how do you know anything about him, or whether he is my spark or not?"

"Why, people talk a bit sometimes, particularly when a pretty lass is in question. Dame Blackledge could hardly have patience to let me examine her sore toe this morning in her eagerness to tell me how much taken up the young squire was with a certain person. I believe he himself makes no secret of his admiration. Humpy Jim at the Red Dog is

Susan Blackledge's nephew. Mr. Harry is lodging at the Red Dog. But don't you be afraid, my dear; I said nothing about his suit to Edward Frith. It's my business to hearten the lad up, not to cast him down. But here he comes now. Help me to spread out the blanket, child."

"Isn't the ground rather hard?" suggested Margery. "Wouldn't it be better to fetch a mattress?"

"Set him up—a mattress indeed! I'm not going to cock up a strapping fellow like that with mattresses. There's naught in the world amiss with him but a broken bone or two. Now, if you were to talk of fetching a stool for me, there'd be some sense in it. I'm getting stiff in the joints, and I haven't exactly the figure to sit comfortably on the ground. No, no," as Margery was about to dart towards the house; "I'm not in earnest, my lass. I've no mind to sit here anyhow, 'tis too chilly. I've to see old Molly about her rheumatism, and I want to have a look round the place."

"But you are not going to leave us alone!" gasped the girl.

"Do you think Edward Frith will eat you? You've only got to run away if he tries—he can't run after you."

By this time Farmer Frith and his bearers were within earshot, and further argument was impossible. When the young man had been lowered to the place prepared for him, Margery advanced to greet him.

"I am so glad to see you out, Mr. Frith; I feel sure the air will do you good," she began primly, stooping down so that he might take her hand.

"I thank you, Miss Burchell, I am indeed vastly glad to get out for a bit. Dr. May tells me 'twas you thought of it."

"Well, it seemed a pity anybody should be shut up on such a beautiful day," rejoined she.

She was standing looking down at him somewhat awkwardly, with her arms hanging by her sides.

"It is indeed a beautiful day," he agreed.

"The air is so mild," said Margery, "and you hardly feel it here."

"And the sun is shining so bright," put in the doctor, "and the sky is so blue, and it wouldn't be so blue if there were any clouds to be seen. There, now I've contributed my share to this interesting conversation, so I think I'll toddle off and look at Molly. Molly's rheumatics have got so bad that even the mutton-bone which she carries in her pocket doesn't cure them. I've promised her a bottle of liniment, but she'll not be happy unless she shows me those poor twisted hands of hers. Well now, Margery child, suppose you sit down on the grass; it's nice and dry, and won't hurt you. *There's* something you've forgotten, you might tell Farmer Frith now. The grass is dry and is also green—he'll be glad to hear that."

He went away laughing.

"Isn't Dr. May a quiz?" said Margery, as she obediently sat down.

The expression was one she had picked up from Harry Westacre. Edward did not, however, take heed; he was looking at her in that intent way which she had before noted in him, and the memory of which always made her heart beat faster.

"How good you are to come," he said in a low voice.

Margery scarcely knew what answer to make; she looked at him, and opened her lips as though to speak, but closed them again and smiled instead. She felt very shy. Edward, too, though no longer stiff and constrained as during their previous interview, seemed to find a difficulty in speaking. Their eyes met once or twice, and were immediately averted, but presently each would steal a glance at the other again, and always, as it seemed, at the same moment.

All at once Margery sprang to her feet.

"I was forgetting my basket," she cried. "You know, Mr. Frith, I promised you another griddle-cake, and you said you wouldn't refuse; and I've brought you a few other little things too, and I hope you'll take them in a friendly way and not be offended this time."

"No, indeed; I am sure I am very grateful to you I don't know what I've done to deserve such kindness. Indeed I don't deserve it at all. You are kind because you can't help it, any more than the sun can help shining."

"Now, don't let's talk of the sun any more," said Margery, with a little tilt of the chin that was half-impertinent and wholly delicious. "If Dr. May comes back he will make fun of us again, and think we have nothing to say to each other. I'll go and fetch my basket."

She disappeared, pushing her way amid the tangled growth of bushes which over-grew the path, and presently came back carrying the basket.

"I have brought a knife too, see," she cried, "for I have made up my mind that you shall taste that cake and tell me how excellent you find it. Now here is a clean cloth—I put one in on purpose. I always think a thing looks twice as nice when it is tucked away neatly under white damask. This is some of my grandmother's spinning, Mr. Frith. Isn't it fine? No one in the whole countryside spins such a fine thread as my grandmother. Now, will you have it across your knees?"

"If you please," said Edward.

He raised himself from a semi-recumbent posture, and Margery, setting down her basket, poked up his pillows so that they afforded more adequate support. She took an odd pleasure in ministering to the tall, powerful man who, had he been sound, would have rebelled at being thus waited on. He submitted now, shyly and silently, yet with evident pleasure.

"Now for my cake," cried she, removing it from

the basket. "I've brought a cream cheese too, and some young radishes—they're washed and ready for use. I do think little young, young radishes are very toothsome. There's a pot of apple jelly too, and some fresh butter, and one or two of grandma's twists; but those will be for to-morrow's breakfast—we'll leave them in the basket. Do try the cake—see how light it is. I mayn't be able to spin so fine a thread as grandma, but my cakes beat hers for lightness."

"It is indeed delicious," said Edward. He was a little bewildered, but nevertheless he smiled.

"You'll let me spread the cheese for you on the next slice," said she, watching him with pretty satisfaction. "I'll cut off a little corner, see,—it won't spoil it, but I want to be here while you taste it. Isn't that well made? That's my work too. Don't you approve of it?"

"Very much," he rejoined.

Margery wrapped up the cheese again in its cabbage-leaf and restored it to the basket. She had hitherto been kneeling up beside it, but she now dropped back upon her heels, and with her hands clasped in her lap watched her charge contentedly. In the expression of her face a child's delight in a new game was mingled with womanly solicitude. The latter predominated by and by, and her looks grew serious; whereupon Edward grew serious too, and by the time the second slice of cake was finished they were gazing at each other like two mutes.

Edward folded up the napkin and returned it to her. "I am exceedingly obliged to you," he said.

"Oh, don't mention it," rejoined Margery.

How formal he was! Was he really a dull man, and did his face belie him? It was curious that a man who looked as if he could say so much could find never a word for her.

"I suppose you never talk, Mr. Frith?" she said suddenly.

He started. "I live very much alone," he said quickly, "and I have little to talk about. I fear you must find me a very dull companion."

"Oh, it doesn't matter," she returned in a vexed tone. "I daresay I'm too fond of talking myself, but I thought you might have thought of something to say to me. You hardly took any notice of the cake," with an injured air.

"Nay, surely I said it was excellent."

"Oh, if it had been as heavy as lead you would have had to say that for politeness' sake. I told you I had a lighter hand than grandma, and you never said anything at all."

"Well, but what should I have said? You told me so, and of course I believed you——"

"Well, of course, I should think so indeed! But anybody else in your place would have found some pretty answer. It's only natural that my hand should be lighter than grandma's."

She turned about the pretty plump member in

question with a coquettish smile, stealing a glance at Edward through her downcast lashes. Margery's eyelashes were very long and curling, golden at the tips but darkening at the base; they lent her face a wonderfully innocent air. Edward, however, did not speak; Margery could not divine that his silence arose from the fear of saying too much.

"Other people know how to appreciate my handiwork," she remarked coldly, as she rose to her feet. "I wonder where Dr. May is. It's time I was getting back. Grandma won't know what's become of me; she's put back dinner an hour already."

For a moment a look of eager protest flashed over Edward's face, but it vanished as swiftly as the sunlight from a hillside when chased by a passing cloud.

"Must you really go?" he began falteringly; and then, "Oh, of course you must, if Mrs. Tickell is waiting for you."

"Dr. May!" called Margery. "Are you there, Dr. May?"

An answering voice came from the other side of the garden, and presently the doctor strolled towards them; Margery standing, meanwhile, with her back towards Farmer Frith, apparently oblivious of his presence.

"Well," said the doctor, "I hope you have had an agreeable talk, you two."

"Vastly agreeable indeed," rejoined Margery. "How are poor Molly's rheumatics?"

"She's got a lump the size of a door-knob on her wrist, poor old soul; and she tells me it gets no better, though she has been to a wise woman and tried a variety of charms on it. I much fear that my nostrums won't be of very much use. Well, Edward, you'll have plenty of apples this year, that's one thing—I've been having a look at your orchard, but some of your trees have got blighted, I'm sorry to say."

"That's no wonder," retorted he, with so much bitterness of tone that Margery wheeled to look at him. "There's a blight all over this place, doctor. Small wonder no one cares to put a foot in it."

"Why, what an ungallant thing to say when Margery Burchell here has just set foot in it—a very pretty foot too, as who should know better than I that held it in my hand this morning while lifting her on to Jerry. Well, must we be going?"

"I think so," said Margery.

Once more she bent over Edward. There was vexation in her face, but reproach too.

"You shouldn't talk like that," she said. "'Tis foolish and wrong to fancy such things. Why should there be a blight on the place, and why should not your friends care to come and see you?"

"Since you are good enough to care——" said Edward. He broke off, wrung her hand, and then, as if ashamed of his warmth, dropped it quickly.

Margery walked away after Dr. May with a pouting lip and a swelling heart. She returned evasive answers to the doctor's queries, and fell into silence when they reached the moor; but when about half-way across she broke out with sudden energy—

"I hate too good a man!"

"What do you mean, child?"

"Farmer Frith is like the model boy in the spelling-book, who says, 'Yes, if you please,' and 'No, I thank you,' and shuts the door after him, and never lolls in his chair. He is the most stupid man I ever saw, and so prim and precise. He didn't care whether he ate grandma's cakes or mine, and when I told him I was best at baking, I vow I think he was quite shocked. No doubt he thought it very unbecoming for a young person to boast. And then, what does he mean by saying disagreeable things about blights on the place just when we have been at the pains to visit him?"

"I thought, my dear," said the doctor innocently, "you said just now that Edward was like the model boy who always says what he ought to say?"

"He oughtn't to have said that," she cried emphatically.

"You'll tumble off if you bounce about. I think

the remark escaped him involuntarily in his disappointment at our early departure."

"Oh, do you think we went away too soon? Why didn't you propose to stay longer?"

"The lady is the best judge of such matters," said Dr. May.

Margery said no more, but the doctor felt the arms which clasped his sturdy waist twitch a little, and he smiled to himself.

CHAPTER IX

"A man in all the world's new fashion planted,
That hath a mint of phrazes in his brain:
One, whom the music of his own vain tongue
Doth ravish, like enchanting harmony.
. . . . . .
Come here to me, thou lass o' my love,
Come here an' kneel wi' me,
The morn is fu' o' the presence o' my God
And I canna pray but thee."

MARGERY sat in the orchard, where the grass grew already thick and long; her head was, as usual, uncovered, in spite of the fresh breeze that set the apple boughs above her swaying, so that her cotton gown was now in shadow, now in light, and the tracery of shade cast by the interlaced boughs now covered her face like a veil, now withdrew, leaving it all radiant.

Young Harry Westacre sprawled on the ground at her feet; he, too, had removed his hat, and seemed very much at home. The crisp waving locks on his brow were sometimes lifted by a merry gust that came sweeping through the lichened trunks; and then he would lift a jewelled hand and put them in place again. A very fine figure of a man looked he, as he lay thus prone, with his shapely limbs out-

stretched, and his handsome head raised now and then, the better, no doubt, to gaze at Margery. In the background, through the vista of flowering trees, was a grassy slope, across which the form of Mrs. Tickell might be seen pacing back and forth, watering-pot in hand, sprinkling the length of the snowy stretch of homespun linen which had been laid out to bleach.

Harry's eyes presently wandered in that direction, and he laughed.

"And so we and our respected grandma are not on the best of terms this morning? It struck me that she looked mighty sour."

"We had a few words," rejoined Margery hastily. "Grandma thinks I'm too self-willed, but after all I do think I know best."

"Oh, of course," replied the young man. "I am prepared to back you up at all hazards."

"Nay, 'tis a small matter," she returned, feeling somewhat annoyed at Mr. Westacre's careless readiness to approve her actions, without even taking the trouble to acquaint himself with the motives which prompted them. "But I ought not to be idling here, Mr. Westacre—I should be helping my grandmother at this hour."

"Nay, don't be so cruel, I have but just come; and you know since my ruthless parent turned me out I have not a soul to speak to save yourself. I vow were it not for your kindness, Miss Margery, I should die of melancholy in this dull place."

"I thought you said you liked a country life," ejaculated Margery, opening her innocent eyes very wide.

"Pardon me—I said under *some* circumstances I should like it very much. Eden no doubt was a country place, but Adam assuredly found the time hang heavy on his hands until Eve appeared."

"I think I really must go to grandma," cried Margery, starting up.

He stretched out a long, lazy arm, and laid a detaining hand gently on her skirt. "Nay, not just yet. Tell me first the reason of your falling out."

"It does not amount to a falling out, sir. You must know there is a good bit of land attached to the mill, which my father farmed himself until last year, when his health began to fail, and then, being unable to look after it, he let it to Mr. Collinson for grazing—but only for a year. At Midsummer it will come into our hands again. Mr. Collinson would like to take it on, and my grandmother is all for leaving it with him. But I want to get it back —why shouldn't we farm it ourselves?"

"How would you set about farming, pretty one?" inquired Harry Westacre.

"Why, 'tis easy enough. I know very well what my father used to do. I was always with him before I went to school. I could take the men on again, and look after them same as he did," cried Margery energetically. "For one thing," she added, "I should like a dairy."

Harry sat up and whistled dubiously.

"Are not your hands already full?"

"No, sir, indeed; not half full enough. You see," she went on in a confidential tone, "my grandmother manages the house, and always has done so ever since I was a baby. She wouldn't like me to interfere, and I don't want to, neither; and Rob manages the mill—under me, of course," she added grandly. "But there's no need for me to be there all day, and—— Well, I don't know; I don't seem to have enough to do."

"Surely," said Westacre, eyeing her from under his narrowed lids, "you could fill up your time with reading or embroidery. And have you not a harpsichord in your parlour? They tell me you play quite prettily. You have had the education of a lady—why not live like one?"

"I'm not a lady—and I don't want to live like one," returned she, thrusting out her red under-lip, and plucking impatiently at the grasses. "I don't want to pretend to be what I'm not," she added defiantly, flashing a glance at the young squire.

"True, true," said he. "Ladies have but a dull life, after all. I am tired of being a gentleman, I know."

"La!" said Margery, laughing blithely, "that's a strange thing. And what would you like to be then, Mr. Harry?"

Harry stretched out his hand and plucked one of the grass stems too, one out of the very patch whence Margery plucked hers. He sucked it

deliberately, eyeing her the while with a droll look, and then he cast it away.

"I think I should like to be a miller," he said.

Margery sprang to her feet, and he did the same.

"Now, don't go," he pleaded, stepping round so as to bar her path. "Why should you go? Why are you angry with me?"

"I have no mind to be made fun of," retorted she.

"I swear by all the gods in Olympus," cried he, "that I spoke the sober truth. There is nothing in all the world that at this moment I desire so much as to be a miller. Come, surely there's no more harm in my wishing to be a miller than in your setting your heart on being a farmer?"

"Indeed, sir, the cases are not at all similar," retorted she. "I am a country girl to whom such things come naturally. You are a fine gentleman."

Harry threw out a long forefinger, and she paused in her discourse.

"*Was*," he corrected. "I'm a fine gentleman no longer. It behoves me, Miss Margery, to work for my daily bread. Indeed, I am not jesting. If I don't work I shall starve."

"Oh," cried Margery sympathetically, "that is very sad, Mr. Westacre; yet I cannot but think that if you told the Squire you were sorry, and promised amendment of your ways, he would forgive you."

"I think not," said Harry, with mock humility. He paused, fixing his bold brown eyes on her face. "The fact is," he continued, "I'm not sorry."

"I can scarce believe that," she said stiffly.

"'Tis true, nevertheless, my dear," quoth he; and with a sudden movement he caught her hand. "How can I be sorry for what has brought me near you? You and I now stand on the same level; I am as free to love you as any other man. I want to marry you, Margery, my love."

Margery reddened, and pulled away her hand abruptly.

"But I don't think I want to marry you, Mr. Harry," she cried. "I scarce know you, and it seems such a strange thing—and however could you manage the mill?"

"Live and learn," replied he.

He was quite calm and collected, and indeed rather amused. "You shall learn to love me, pretty Margery, and I will learn to be a miller. Is not that a bargain?"

"Nothing of the kind," she returned angrily. "I will have nothing to do with it. I am not even sure that I like you, Mr. Harry."

"Oh yes, you do," responded he tranquilly. "Come, I defy you to look me in the face and say that you do not."

Answering the challenge, she looked him full in the face. It was a very winsome face; handsome, gay, and wearing now an expression of tenderness which she had never seen before.

"I," she began, and then faltered—"I am not sure," she said.

Sunday came, a bright, breezy day, with the air full of the scent of growing things. Harry Westacre stood beside the lych-gate, amid a group of young rustics, farmers' sons for the most part, laughing and talking noisily, and occasionally slapping his boot with his gold-headed cane. He topped his new-made cronies by a head, and looked insolently handsome as he stood leaning against the crumbling stone pillar. The bell had not yet ceased ringing, and presently Margery of the Mill came tripping up the lane, brave in her Sabbath finery. In her mittened hand she carried a great posy of primroses, white and yellow, culled from the bank behind the mill. Harry stepped forward so as to almost bar her path.

"A bunch of spring flowers," quoth he, "and herself the fairest flower of all. Pray, my dear, spare me one for my coat?"

Something over-assured, not to say familiar, in his tone jarred upon the girl.

She jerked away her sleeve, and turned her head aside without replying, mounting the steps with a dignified air—her frilled skirts swaying from side to side as she walked up the flagged path, and her little chin tilted in the air as though she had been a lady of quality.

"My sweetheart is peevish to-day," cried Harry airily, and his comrades laughed.

Margery entered the church with burning cheeks. His sweetheart indeed!

Presently, with a great bustle and clatter, the Squire's coach drew up at the door, and the group at the lych-gate respectfully doffed their hats as the old gentleman descended from the vehicle. Harry uncovered also, with an exaggerated assumption of deference, and stood aside to let his father pass; then he grinned in the face of his brother, who followed him, and playfully tapped the shoulder of a third young man who brought up the rear.

"Ha!" cried the latter, with a startled laugh. "Why, bless my soul! Have we here the prodigal?"

"Even so, my friend, and, what's more, eating his husks with an appetite. 'Gad, the old man's fury alone is enough to give a flavour to 'em. But the bell's stopped ringing; to your place, man."

"You are never coming into the family pew?" queried the other, as Harry passed after him up the steps.

"Nay, I know better than that. Look out for me next the pretty miller's daughter. If you could manage to direct the Squire's attention to the same quarter I should be vastly obliged. Damme! I'd go to church every day for a sight of his face."

On entering the building he made straight for Margery's pew, and took his place beside her, much to her dissatisfaction and the astonishment of her grandmother. He busied himself ostentatiously in finding the places in the girl's book, and was evidently prepared to share it with her. The occasional glances which he shot towards the great

panelled pew of the lord of the manor revealed to him that these manœuvres had not been unnoticed by the latter, upon whose brow sat a veritable thundercloud. Harry chuckled to himself, and renewed his lover-like attitude; Margery, however, presently circumvented him by slipping round to the other side of Mrs. Tickell, and entrenching herself in the extreme corner of the seat. Very crestfallen and foolish indeed did the gallant young squire look in consequence; more particularly when Mrs. Tickell, observing that he had come unprovided with books, was obliging enough to offer a partial use of hers, recalling his wandering attention by a vigorous nudge from under her Paisley shawl.

Scarcely less thunderous than the Squire's was Harry's countenance, when he emerged from the church at the close of the service, hastily followed by his friend, who hurried out for the express purpose of clapping him derisively on the shoulder.

"The pretty miller's daughter does not seem too graciously disposed towards thee. By the way, is it the miller who is pretty, or his daughter? And if the miller, where is the fair wight?"

"Dead!" responded Harry laconically.

"Dead? Ho, ho! So much the better for the daughter. If it were not for your father I should be asking to be introduced — she is as handsome a young woman as I've seen any time these five years. And talking of your father, Harry, according to your wish I endeavoured by

a great display of curiosity on my own part to direct his gaze towards you. We were both much interested, particularly in the excellent duenna. We miss thee sadly at the Hall, Hal. I had not come at all, but I expected to find thee. Now here comes thy charmer—'gad, what a carriage the girl has!"

"Not so bad for a village wench," drawled Harry, gazing at Margery carelessly from under his lowered eyelashes. She heard the words and raised her head still higher. She resented them, however, less than she would have done had she not rightly guessed that her suitor was smarting under the somewhat severe snub which she had inflicted on him in the face of his own family, and before the entire village. Tongues had been wagging for some days about scapegrace Master Harry's attentions to the pretty heiress at the mill; people had even spoken to her on the subject, but she had sent them away unsatisfied.

Late in the afternoon of the same day Edward Frith, lying languidly on his hard couch, heard steps beneath his window, and looking forth descried a woman's figure.

"Who's there?" cried he. The be-ribboned hat was tilted upwards, and two blue eyes which had haunted his dreams of late looked timidly, albeit gaily, in his face.

"It is I, Mr. Frith. The discourse this morning bade us exercise works of mercy; and so I come hither to visit the sick and comfort the afflicted."

"Alone?" cried Edward.

There was a note of grave rebuke in his voice. Margery flushed over face and neck, down even to the edge of her laced kerchief. She hung her head like a child.

"I can soon go back again," she said in a low voice.

But even prudent Edward, filled though he was with a curious sense of responsibility where the girl was concerned, could not go so far.

"Nay," he cried quickly; "come in and rest. Surely it is not possible that you walked all this way!"

She had by this time disappeared into the house, and he could hear her light feet running upstairs. The next moment she appeared in the doorway, a radiant vision of youth and beauty, with, moreover, a certain sweet shyness in look and attitude which went straight to his heart. He made an impetuous movement as though to rise from his couch, and she gave a little scream.

"Lie still! Lie still! Have you forgotten that your leg is broken?"

"Indeed, for the moment it went out of my mind," returned he. "It is hard to have to lie here like a log when such a visitor comes to me. Will you not come near so that I may shake hands?"

She went up to him, still with that new-found timidity, and he wrung the little hand with unconscious warmth.

"Is it possible that you walked?" he repeated.

"It is only three miles across the moor," she answered, laughing. "I think nothing of that. I knew you were so lonely," she added almost pleadingly. "I fancied if I came it would make a little change for you."

"God knows I am lonely," returned he, but, falling back upon his cushions, he continued to gaze at her with something of the same concern with which he had first hailed her advent.

"But you think I ought not to have come?" she said hesitatingly, and looking at him once more with that appeal in her eyes. These eyes were soft enough now, and her lips quivered a little. "You think I did wrong to come?" she persisted. "Tell me the truth."

"That is a hard thing to ask of me," he said in a low voice.

"But you will tell me the truth?" she cried, and the fire came back to her eyes.

He returned her gaze steadily.

"I think perhaps your father wouldn't have allowed it," he said after a pause.

Margery coloured again painfully.

"I thank you," she said stiffly, after a moment. She pulled down her mittens and pursed her lips; her little foot was tapping on the floor, her brows were frowning.

"I think I'd best turn round and go home again," she remarked distantly.

"You bade me tell you the truth," said poor Edward. "You know very well that I—I don't want you to go."

"Then I'll stay," returned she immediately, drawing forward a chair. "Is your handkerchief handy, Mr. Frith? Because this is my best gown, and I don't believe this chair has been dusted since I was here the other day. Since I am here I will stay a little bit, but I won't come again."

"I didn't say that," pleaded poor Edward, and his eyes and voice were much more eloquent than his words. "You know—you must know—what it is to me to see you, but I did feel bound to tell you, when you asked me so positive, that I thought your father wouldn't have approved of your walking alone across the moor to see—to see me. 'Tis quite a different matter when you come with your grandmother or—or anybody else."

"Next time I will bring somebody else then," said Margery. "Now, have no more scruples, Mr. Frith. Since I am here, what can I do for you?"

She took off her hat and tossed it on the table, thus allowing her host for the first time to view the abundance of her curly yellow hair.

She repeated her question presently, for Edward, lost in wondering admiration, forgot to speak.

"I beg your pardon," he stammered then, "I think I want nothing but just to keep still and look at you."

She gazed at him sharply; the speech savoured

somewhat of the flowery compliments addressed to her so often by Harry Westacre. But his expression disarmed her; nothing could be more honest, more undisguised, than his admiration, yet it was an admiration which did not offend. Nevertheless she was suddenly conscious of a bashfulness which had never affected her in the presence of the venturesome young squire.

"I think I will read to you," she said gravely, and drew forth a little devotional book from her pocket.

"If you please," returned he.

She opened the volume and began to read; it was a treatise by some antiquated divine, full of high-sounding words and long phrases, but it dealt with the love of God; and Edward, lying back with half-closed eyes and listening to the round, clear voice, felt that he was experiencing a foretaste of heaven itself.

A lilac-tree was blooming not far from the window, and a thrush was singing with long-drawn, mellow notes, and the breeze, coming in, lifted the curls on Margery's brow, and played with the soft folds of her kerchief; and the ponderous sentences came tripping from her tongue with the incessantly recurring refrain: God is Love—the Love of the Creator for His creatures passeth understanding.

And yea, verily, said Edward to himself. Then came a human thought. And love—the love of man for woman—sometimes passeth understanding too.

CHAPTER X

"But, as some bird of heavenly plumage fair
He looked, which down from higher regions came
And perched it there, to see what lay beneath."

ON the following morning Margery was sitting demurely by the open window, her thimble on her finger, her work-basket by her side. Presently in came sauntering Harry Westacre.

"You seem very busy to-day," he said to her by way of greeting.

"I am busy," returned she, without raising her eyes. Then, after a pause, "Who let you in?" she asked.

"I walked in," he replied, "like the poor harmless fly into the parlour of the crafty spider."

Margery impatiently lifted the shoulder nearest to him and jerked her thread sharply.

"You have entangled me in your web, you see," he continued.

"Ah," said she, suddenly raising her eyes, "I am not so bad for a village wench, am I?"

He laughed, and sat down upon the table.

"You put me in a devil of a temper," he

remarked. "Why did you flout me, you saucy girl, before the whole congregation?"

"To teach you not to make free," replied Margery, looking full at him.

"I crave a thousand pardons. But is it making free to recognise beauty when you see it? Can you indeed be angry with me for expressing an admiration which I cannot repress, or for giving way to a tenderness of which you are very well aware?"

No doubt Mr. Harry could speak like a book sometimes; nevertheless Margery shook her head decidedly.

"You make too sure of me," she said. "I don't really want to have anything to do with you, Mr. Harry. You are not of my own degree; and you are too—too flighty. I don't trust you a bit."

He protested vehemently, but she scarcely heard him, for her thoughts had flown away to that lonely upper room, and she seemed to hear another voice —a voice raised in gentle reproof: "Alone! . . . I think your father would not have liked it!"

Not a very lover-like speech, but how steadfast the face, how earnest the eyes!

"I could trust that man," she thought to herself.

"What are you stitching at?" inquired Harry presently, finding she paid no heed to his passionate outpourings.

"Can't you see?" she inquired.

"Looks like a man's shirt," he returned, half incredulously.

"It is a man's shirt," she said composedly.

"Whose is it?" very sharply. "Is it Rob's? I don't like to see you doing such menial things."

"Rob's!" she repeated contemptuously. "It is certainly not Rob's!"

"Then whose?" he asked pertinaciously.

"It belongs to a friend of mine," she replied. "A man who has no women-folk to do for him, and so I thought I would put things to rights for him a little."

Harry got off the table and came close up to her; his face was dark with anger.

"You refuse to tell me whom it belongs to?" he cried, and, before she could realise his intention, he jerked the garment out of her hand.

"Frith!" he ejaculated, identifying the half-erased name beneath the torn frill.

Margery looked up bravely. "Hand me back my work, if you please," she cried peremptorily. "You are very unmannerly, Mr. Westacre."

"You actually stoop to do service for that fellow," thundered Harry, "and you deny it to my face."

"I don't deny it," she retorted, with spirit. "Have a care, sir; I won't be insulted in my own house! Unless you compose yourself, I'll call the men to turn you out."

She meant what she said, and Harry, with a strong effort, controlled his fury.

"You expect too much of me," he said in a gentler tone. "Here am I, your devoted lover and

servant, kept in the dark, while you—surely, in common honesty, you should have told me you were on such terms with another man?"

"Such terms! What do you mean by such terms? There is nothing whatever between me and Edward Frith, Mr. Westacre, except that my father loved him, and he is in a sorry plight just now—not able to stir hand or foot, and with no one to look after him." But as she spoke she blushed.

"Has he—did he ever mention my name to you?" broke out Harry impetuously. The next moment he could have bitten his tongue out for rage at his own foolhardiness.

"Mention your name?" cried she, with genuine surprise. "No; why should he mention it to me?"

"Oh, I know not why I asked so foolish a thing. Why, indeed, should the good farmer speak to you about me? What have we in common? A jealous man has his wild fancies, you see."

Margery bit off her thread meditatively, but made no reply. She was privately resolving to speak to Edward of Harry Westacre at the very earliest opportunity. Every word by which the young gentleman strove to cover his mistake did but strengthen her conviction that Edward might very well have something to say with regard to him, and that Mr. Westacre was extremely anxious that this something should not reach her ears.

Meanwhile Harry continued to plead his cause with her, with all the charm of which, when he

chose, he was a master. Margery would have been amused, and possibly flattered, at any other time, but just then she happened to be thinking of Farmer Frith, and of the expression which now and then she had detected in his eyes.

Her visit had caused him, as she very well knew, the very greatest pleasure—possibly something more; yet he had tacitly forbidden her to repeat it; he had even curtailed it, by reminding her, when she had finished her reading, that it was growing late, and that it would not do for her to traverse the moor unprotected at an hour when many idle fellows might possibly be loitering about. She thought of this last item with a mixture of annoyance and satisfaction. It was in a manner pleasant to be taken care of as Edward had taken care of her; like many of her sex, she rather liked being ruled. But, on the other hand, was it not a little disconcerting to be reminded of her duty in such a matter? And why could not Edward—if he really appreciated her company—have forgotten the time, overlooked all these tiresome considerations, and given himself up to enjoyment?

By and by, having finished stitching Edward's wristband, she folded up the shirt, and replaced it in a basket.

"It's just upon dinner-time," she remarked, with a little yawn, interrupting Harry's flowery harangue.

He frowned, and bit his lip.

"'Pon my life I never knew anyone so cruel!" he cried. "Confess you've not listened to a word I've been saying?"

"Well, not to many of them, sir, I must own. You seem to say the same thing over and over."

"Doth not the turtle-dove do the like? Will you not at least give me a word of hope, my dearest girl?"

"I don't know my own mind, and that's the truth," said Margery. "Such a thing has never happened to me before. You are a very grand gentleman, much too good for me, to be sure, and there's times when I think I could like you very well; but yesterday, for instance, you behaved most unmannerly, and to-day again——"

"'Tis all love, I protest, my charmer," cried he. "Love will make a poor wretch do many desperate things."

"I don't think I could put faith in you," returned she. "'Tis an impolite thing to say," she added seriously, "but I do really believe it's my money you're after, Mr. Harry."

Harry could not repress a smile; he had a particularly frank and pleasing smile, which had served him well on many occasions when his position threatened to be awkward.

"I will even own that in the beginning your fortune was no small attraction, my love," he said candidly. "I am a penniless poor devil, and forced by hard fate to earn my own livelihood. As I told

you some time ago, it struck me that I could learn to be a very worthy miller. Come, do me the justice to remember that I made no secret of my plight."

"No," said Margery doubtfully. "I can see what you're at, Mr. Harry, but I can't for the life of me think what good I should gain by it."

"Why, you will surely not be so monstrous uncivil as to deny that you would gain a very fine husband?" returned he, with a vexed laugh. "Does my love amount to nothing? Since I have come to know you better I have learnt to love you more and more."

"You said you were in love with me at first sight," said Margery hesitatingly.

"So I was—how could I help it? Come hither and look at your own face in the glass, and tell me if 'twas possible to avoid it. I swear that my passion for you increases hour by hour—I swear that if you had never a penny I should love you just the same."

"Oh, Mr. Harry, don't swear that," cried she. But his warmth was convincing nevertheless; and when, obeying his behest, she contemplated her own image in the old-fashioned mirror which hung over the mantelpiece, she could not but own that it was not at all unlikely he should love her for her own sake.

CHAPTER XI

"Paint that lilac kerchief, bound
Her soft face, her hair around;
Tied under the archest chin
Mockery ever ambush'd in."

EARLY next day in the following week, just as Edward was preparing to settle down to another day of wearisome solitude, Margery's gig drove up to his door, and that young lady, accompanied by Jenny, descended therefrom. While Margery unharnessed the horse, Frith, looking out, observed her companion take a quantity of packages from the gig; amongst the rest a long-handled broom, a dust-pan, insufficiently covered with brown paper, and a large bundle of linen.

In a few minutes Margery came out of the stable, looking up at Edward's window as she did so, and nodding brightly as she descried him.

"We are going to work wonders here this morning," she called out. "Now, come along, Jenny, you can begin at the stairs, and when you've done——"

The remaining words were indistinguishable, for by this time she had entered the house, followed by her underling.

After issuing a few more directions, and holding a parley with Molly somewhere in the lower regions, she went upstairs to Edward's quarters.

Within the doorway her assurance seemed to desert her, and she came forward with that new-found timidity which he found so sweet.

"You won't be angry, will you?" she said. "There is nothing much to do at our place, so I've brought Jenny to have a good clean up—Molly doesn't mind—I've been talking to her. And we are using your own soap," she added defiantly.

He burst out laughing, much to her relief; she laughed too, and rubbed her hands gleefully.

"You won't know the place when we've done with it," she cried. "I have brought back some of your clothes too; they are mended, and should keep whole for some time. But you ought not to let them get into such a state, Mr. Frith—a stitch in time saves nine, you know. Now I'm going to dust a little here, myself, as Jenny won't have time to do everything. I've brought a duster, because it really is a shame to use any more of your handkerchiefs."

He laughed again, and watched her as she opened her paper parcel and drew thence a large bibbed apron, which she immediately put on, and a cotton handkerchief which she proceeded to tie round her head.

"To keep the dust off," she explained gravely. Then, taking a duster from the same receptacle, she set to work at once in a most business-like manner.

The red-and-yellow handkerchief was tied in a very fascinating manner, and in spite of her precaution a few curly locks escaped from its folds. The big apron was rather becoming than otherwise, Edward thought; and how deftly the little hands moved, how graceful was the sweep of the round white arms!

He lay back, watching her with great contentment, and feeling it exceedingly delightful to be ministered to by this very simple angel.

They were for the most part silent. Margery was too busy to talk, and Edward too shy, except when she crossed the room from time to time to shake her duster outside the window. To perform this operation she was necessarily obliged to lean across him as he lay in the window-seat, and sometimes she stood so close to him that he could smell the faint perfume of lavender from her clean apron; and sometimes he would look into her face with a smile, and she would pause a moment and smile too.

"I didn't know," he said all at once, "that you were so clever at housework."

"Oh, I am very house-proud," returned she. "There is nothing I like better than dusting and polishing. But I never can work my fill at home, because granny likes to do it all herself. I am going to keep a dairy, I think."

"Are you indeed?" said he. "That's something new."

"I like being very busy," she returned. "I want to farm some of our land next year."

"Yourself?" inquired he.

"Myself!" returned Margery, nodding. "I could do it well enough. I'm happiest out of doors, you must know. But grandma is mad at the notion; she would like to keep me stitching at a sampler all day."

"And will you carry out your plans in spite of her?" asked he in a tone of disapproval.

"Now you are going to scold," cried she, uplifting a saucy finger. "You see, I think I know better than grandma, and it is no harm to be fond of your own way, when it is the right way."

"But how are you to know that?" inquired he, with an indulgent smile; then, more earnestly, "I think it would do you no harm to mind your grandmother. Young folks are better under control; especially young women."

Now for some reason or other Margery was even more annoyed at a hint of disapprobation from Edward Frith than she had been with Harry Westacre's over-readiness to fall in with her views.

"My word!" she cried impertinently, "would you preach me a sermon, Mr. Frith? I don't hold with that notion. Liberty is a fine thing!"

"Not for women," he persisted.

"Perhaps it is just as well you've no women-folk of your own," she cried, with gathering irritation.

"You would make a slave of your wife, I suppose!"

The words leaped out almost before she knew; and she had no sooner spoken than she began to blush furiously. He reddened too, but did not answer, and it was a relief to both when Jenny took up her position on the stairs immediately outside the partly opened door. The sound of her industry seemed to recall Margery to a sense of her own duty, and she resumed work with fresh energy.

By and by a voice was heard from the landing, Molly's quavering and rather cracked tones.

"'Tis a match for sure!" she cried. "'Tis a match, and a gradely match too!"

"Hush-sh-sh!" whispered Jenny warningly; but the old housekeeper was too deaf to take heed.

"A body don't need to have eyes i' th' back of their heads to see what's going on," she resumed, chuckling.

The rapid clumping of Jenny's clogs announced that she had hastened to repeat her warning at closer quarters.

Margery had been shaking her duster out of the window when those unlucky remarks were let fall, and she continued to shake it with much care and vigour, and for a considerable time after every particle of dust must have fallen from it, her colour coming and going the while. If Edward had dared

to raise his eyes he might have counted the beatings of her heart under the linen bib. At last she was obliged to withdraw her arm and resume her work, but as she turned to do so she could not forbear glancing at him.

What she had expected to detect in his face it was impossible to say; confusion, no doubt, pleasure, perhaps—tenderness, certainly. What she did see filled her with indignation; his face wore an expression of unmitigated annoyance. The shock of it steadied her nerves, she crossed the room with an assured gait, and began to polish the chimney-piece with an unfaltering hand.

"Do you chance to know anything of Mr. Harry Westacre?" she inquired presently.

Edward started, and looked round.

"Why do you ask?" he cried.

There was no mistaking the astonishment, not to say dismay, of his tone.

"Because I am just at this present moment interested in that young gentleman," returned Margery, slowly rubbing the panel up and down. "He's courting me," turning her head to one side, and falling back a little as though to judge her handiwork.

There was a long silence. Margery stole a glance presently from under her lowered lids, and saw that Edward's face was rigidly set, and that he stared straight before him as though lost in painful thought.

"He doesn't seem to like it," she said to herself, and her heart leaped.

"Pardon me," began Edward presently, in a curiously constrained voice. "I couldn't help hearing what those women said just now. Did they mean you and Mr. Westacre?"

"Very likely," said Margery, and she hummed a little tune to herself.

"And you—what do you think of him?" inquired he, still in that odd, harsh tone.

"I?" queried she lightly. "Oh, I don't know."

"Do you love him?" cried Edward sharply.

"La! What a question to ask one all of a sudden! You put me to confusion, I declare."

She could not keep her voice steady, and Edward, bending his eyes upon her with a keen look, took note of evident signs of perturbation and emotion.

"She does love him," he thought, and dropped back upon his pillow. "I might have warned her—and now it is too late!"

"I want to consult you about it," went on Margery, eyeing him narrowly, though she could make nothing of that rigid face. "Would it be very foolish of me to marry him?"

"It depends," said he, with dry lips. "It would have been better for you, no doubt, to have chosen a husband of your own rank; a man with some means of his own," he added emphatically, "who could not be suspected of paying court to you for your money."

Margery's heart swelled with wrath and pain. A man with means of his own! How he said it—coldly, deliberately, as though determined to impress on her how far it was from his thoughts to become himself a wooer!

She turned her back to him and plied her duster again.

"Upon my word, you are mighty civil," she cried in a choked voice. "No man could love me for myself, I suppose? Yet Mr. Westacre says he does."

Edward was silent; it was too late! The mischief was done.

"As he told me straight out to-day," said the girl, with high displeasure, "my fortune was in his mind at first, but after he came to know me he loved me for my own sake—is that so very strange?"

Edward was still silent. Margery had much ado to keep from bursting into tears.

"He is as cold as ice, and as hard as my mill-stone," she cried within herself. "But never mind—he's not the only man in the world," and her thoughts flew back to Harry's handsome face and impassioned tones; yet, somehow, the remembrance failed to comfort her. There were other men in the world, yes! but *this* man cared nothing for her.

"The question is," resumed Edward, in his measured voice, "do you love Mr. Harry Westacre?

Because if you love him, and he loves you, as you suppose, truly——"

She turned towards him slowly, a forced smile upon her lips.

"Ah, no," he cried, with sudden vehemence, "no, have nothing to do with him—he is not worthy of you. Believe me I have reasons for saying so!"

"What reasons?" she cried, with a little gasp. "What reasons can *you* have?"

Edward pulled himself together. What! did she suppose him to be so base as to endeavour to belittle the Squire's son for purposes of his own?

"I'll tell you the truth," he said desperately, and a visible tremor passed through Margery's frame. "I'll tell you what I have kept from you till now."

He stopped short, at a loss how to proceed.

"What can it be?" she said very softly.

"I feared it might hurt you," he went on desperately. "I tried to warn you, but you—you wouldn't be warned!"

"Are you talking about that letter you wrote?" inquired she icily.

"Why, yes! In fact, a few days after your father's death I chanced to overhear some talk between Mr. Westacre and your man Rob. They were talking about courting you—both one and the other. Mr. Harry said he had a mind to pay his

addresses to you on account of your being so well left, and Rob said he had a mind to be master instead of man, and that he would pay court to you too."

"Rob!" exclaimed Margery, letting out the word like a pistol-shot.

"Yes, Rob! They quarrelled about who should have first turn, and they — I can scarce bring myself to tell it—they tossed for it. Mr. Harry won."

"A pretty story!" ejaculated she. "And you——"

"I tried to warn you," said he humbly.

"How could I possibly guess such a thing could be!" cried she impetuously. "You let it go on. You would have stood by without lifting a finger. Yet you call yourself my friend!"

"Do not be unjust!" he exclaimed. "What could I do, after all? What right had I to interfere? I knew you couldn't work the mill without Rob—and as for Mr. Harry—I trusted that your own sense of what was fitting——"

"Oh, of course," she interrupted, with blazing cheeks. "You did very well indeed, Mr. Frith. You are right, quite right; it was no business of yours, and it was much wiser not to meddle with other folks' affairs—much wiser—especially for a cautious man like you."

She had snatched off her headgear, and was now

rapidly folding it; proceeding after a moment to doff her apron.

"I meant it for the best," said Edward.

"Oh, of course!" she cried again. "You are right—quite right."

She rolled up the apron noisily in its paper, and tied on her hat with trembling fingers.

"Would you like to know what *I* think?" she cried, flashing round upon him with startling suddenness. "I think you are a coward!"

And with that she took up her bundle and departed from the room.

CHAPTER XII

"A man's a man for a' that,
For a' that, and a' that.
. . . . .
The honest man, tho' e'er sae poor,
Is King o' men for a' that."

MARGERY left the house in a fever-heat of anger; having informed Jenny that when her work was finished she might walk home across the moor.

The bay horse was sent spinning along the mossy track, the gig wheels bumping in and out of the ruts in a manner which must have been highly deleterious to the springs of that vehicle. The brisk, keen air, which came sweeping across the wide expanse, far from cooling her, seemed to set her blood tingling and boiling in her veins; her head was swimming, but she urged her horse to fresh efforts by hand and voice.

Presently, however, a man on horseback, who had been quietly cantering towards her, swerved across her path, throwing out his hand to stop her progress.

"Why, Margery!" cried Dr. May. "Whither

away so fast? I swear I had a mind to give you in charge for furious driving!"

"I am on my way home," returned she, her voice sounding harsh and unlike itself.

The doctor came close up to her, peering in astonishment and alarm at her flushed face. "Are you ill? You look strangely——"

"No—I thank Heaven there is nothing amiss," returned she, her lip quivering in spite of her. "We are all well—I only want to get home."

"Softly, my dear, softly!" said he; "don't be in such a hurry. Where do you come from now?"

She did not answer; and he continued, watching her sharply from beneath his grizzled brows—

"I myself am on my way to Moorside Farm——"

Involuntarily she frowned and compressed her lips.

"I take, as you know, a great interest in poor Edward. By the way, have you found yourself able to do anything more for him?"

"Oh yes," returned she, with a forced laugh. "I have been to see him once or twice."

"So I hear," said the doctor incautiously. "Ah, Margery, my dear, Edward is a good fellow—he has the truest heart in the world. Come, come," as she set her face, "never look so disdainful, my lass. You and he have had some quarrel, a lovers' quarrel, I daresay."

"How dare you, Dr. May!" cried Margery,

with a sudden outburst of fury; "how dare you think such a thing? Me and Mr. Frith are just acquaintances—we don't care so very much about each other even in that way!"

"Tut, tut!" cried the doctor waggishly; "not so fast, my pretty spitfire. I have heard little tales about your visits to Moorside Farm, so never try to take me in!"

Margery gazed at him stonily.

"I did very wrong to go and see him," she said; "very wrong. He told me so himself."

"Was there ever such a lad?" cried the other, throwing up his eyes and speaking in a vexed tone. "The fellow is a fool to be so straitlaced under the circumstances. There was no manner of harm in such neighbourly little attentions. But I suppose he feared folk might get to talking."

"I suppose they have been talking," returned she, still with her stony look, "else the tale wouldn't have got to your ears."

"There, never fret, my dear," said the old man kindly. "What tale can there be except that a pretty young woman went once or twice on an errand of mercy to a young man who was sick as well as lonely? Devil a bit of harm in that. And, besides, what can the gossips say except maybe that you and he are thinking of making a match of it? And hark ye, Margery, 'twould be a very good thing for both of you. Edward is as good as gold, and as steady as a rock; and you, my dear, are alone in

the world, and want a husband to take care of you."

"Mr. Frith would not think that a good reason for paying his addresses to me," said Margery bitterly. "He is not one, I fancy, to feel much compassion for a girl that's unprotected."

"Pooh! you'd never want to be married out of compassion," cried the other. "As I said to him the other day, 'There's not the like of Margery o' the Mill in the country!'"

Here, to his great surprise, Margery jerked the reins sharply, and set off at a gallop, her wheels almost grazing his horse's legs.

"I must get home," she cried over her shoulder.

"Upon my word," ejaculated the doctor, "whoever weds that little hussy will have his hands full. Yet I wish it might be Edward."

He turned his horse about, and putting him to a brisk trot, soon reached Moorside Farm; where, after securing the animal in the stable, he immediately mounted to Edward's room.

"Hullo!" he cried, stopping short as he passed Jenny on the stairs, "you are one of the lasses from the mill, aren't you? What brings you here?"

"Please, sir," responded Jenny, grinning and dropping a curtsey, "missus told me to clean up a bit."

"Well, the place looks as if it wanted it, doesn't it?" returned he. "They've had a quarrel," he said

to himself — "that's it; a little tiff. It is the privilege of lovers to quarrel."

He found Edward looking very white and miserable, with a book in his hands, but evidently not reading, for by inadvertence the volume was held upside down.

"How's the leg?" inquired the visitor, sitting down.

"I want you to tell me that," returned Edward, with a dismal smile. "Doctor, for Heaven's sake let me get up! Couldn't I hobble about on crutches, or drive in the spring-cart at least? I could look after the place at any rate."

"All in good time," said Dr. May. "I daresay I'll let you up next week. Meanwhile — how's the heart?"

"What are you driving at, sir?" inquired the patient irritably.

"Talking of driving," said the doctor, "I met Margery Burchell just now, skimming along over the moor as if she had a mind to break her neck. I talked to her a bit, but she didn't seem to know whether she were on her head or her heels. Have you and she had words, lad?"

"I fear I vexed her," returned Edward in a low voice. "She told me very kindly and candidly how Mr. Harry Westacre was courting her, and asked me what I thought of him, and I—I did wrong, no doubt—but I thought it better she should know the tale I told you some time ago, sir. I spoke as

gentle as I could," said poor Edward, gazing at the doctor appealingly, "but it hurt her all the same. You see, sir, I should have spoke before; it was too late—she loves him."

"You fool!" cried the doctor, jumping up from his chair and striding about the room. "You great big, stupid, blind fool!"

"Sir!" ejaculated Edward in amazement.

"You d——d fool!" said the doctor.

"Good Heavens!" cried Edward. "Have you gone mad?"

"I am as sane as ever I was in my life," repeated the doctor warmly. "But you, Edward Frith, you are a blasted idiot, sir!"

Edward stared at him blankly.

"I said," he explained,—"I said I had done wrong —I should never have spoke. Of course she was hurt."

For a moment it seemed as though Dr. May was about to be seized by an apoplectic fit; but he presently controlled himself. Going close up to Edward, and seizing him by the wrists, he hissed the words into his ears—

"Edward, Edward, you have thrown away the chance of your life. Why, man, it's you she loves!"

Edward stared at his friend with starting eyes. "Doctor, you are raving!" he cried.

"Faith, my son, you are too modest," retorted the doctor, with a vexed laugh. "I'll stake my professional reputation on the fact. She came to

consult you about Harry Westacre, did she? Poor little tender heart, I'll wager she said more than she meant to. And you—you gave her your sage advice, no doubt; you apologised for warning her—you confessed, I dare swear, that it was no business of yours. You iceberg! Here you lie secure in your refuge, while she, poor little wounded bird, goes flying out into the world, into the very claws of the hawk, for aught you know. You should be ashamed, I say!"

Edward sat upright, white to the lips.

"I would not bear this from any man but you," he cried. "God knows I would not vex her by so much as a word for anything in the world. Ah, doctor, it was hard for me to hold myself in check—I love her better than my life!"

"Then why didn't you tell her so, you great oaf?" cried the doctor. "You think yourself a very fine fellow, no doubt, because you prefer your stupid pride to the happiness which is within your grasp; but have you never thought about her?"

"God knows," said poor Edward tremulously, "I have thought of little else ever since I saw her. I watched her too. Doctor, you are making a mistake. It is Harry Westacre she is thinking of. She was almost beside herself when I advised her to have nothing to do with him."

Dr. May began to stamp about the room once more. "I tell you, Edward Frith, the girl cares no more for Harry Westacre than she cares for me.

If she was almost beside herself 'twas because of your coldness to her. No doubt, when she spoke to you of such an intimate matter, she expected some sign from you. I tell you, that lass loves you and nobody else."

For a moment Edward's face lit up, his eyes dilated, he was opening his lips as though to speak, when some afterthought appeared to strike him, and he fell back upon his pillows with a groan.

"Take my advice," said the doctor warningly; "speak out like a man. I tell you 'twould be a dastardly thing to let the lass eat her heart out because you are too high and mighty to set it at rest."

"You are going too far, sir," cried Frith in a voice which shook with anger. "If you have your notion of what's dastardly, perhaps I have mine. Because I am a beggar, because my house is tumbling about my ears, and my lands are lying waste; because she is alone in the world, and practically at my mercy—at the mercy of any man whom she feels is a little to be trusted—I am to propose this bargain to her? What else would it be but a bargain? Except that all the giving would be on her side and all the taking on mine."

The doctor thrust his hands into his waistcoat pockets, and pursed up his lips derisively.

"Is that the way you young fellows look at such matters in these days?" he inquired. "In my time a young man just said to himself, 'Yon's a bonny

lass—I'll have her if I can,' and the wench said, 'Yon's the only lad I could ever cotton to'—and never troubled herself about whether he had a roof to his head so long as he had a heart in his breast. Fie, Edward! throw away these mean doubts; they are unworthy of you. Go to Margery like an honest man, and ask her straight if she'll marry you."

"I'll die first," said Edward.

CHAPTER XIII

". . . Why, this is he,
That kissed away his hand in courtesy,
That is the ape of form, monsieur the nice."

"I NEVER did see sich a fanciful lass as yo'," grumbled Mrs. Tickell. "First yo' must go trapesin' over the moor to Farmer Frith's of a Toosday morning, takin' Jenny wi' yo' and all, when we're as busy as ever we can be; and then yo' come drivin' back wi'out her when yo' met jest as well ha' waited to gie her a lift whoam, poor wench! How mich stomach d'ye think she'll have for washin' i' th' arternoon, arter a three-mile walk and a hard mornin's wark? There's no sense in't! Sin' yo' were there yo' met as well ha' stopped."

Margery threw her hat upon the table, and dropped wearily on a corner of the settle, but, contrary to her usual custom, did not answer back.

"Everything is at sixes and sevens about this place," continued her grandmother, for some reason more irritated by this unexpected placidity than she would have been by a sharp retort; "and, what's more, yo'r name's in everyone's mouth; it's time there should be an end on't. Some folks is for

couplin' yo' wi' Mr. Westacre, and others says you're carryin' on wi' Edward Frith—and I reckon 't looks like it. When I were yoong 'twould be mich if a lass didn't lose her good name as went visitin' and visitin' a yoong chap as were no kin to her."

"I did very wrong," said Margery, dropping her chin upon her hands.

Mrs. Tickell was mollified. "Coom," she said, "theer's no sich great harm done, arter all; but yo' met as well make up your mind, my wench, and choose one or t'other. That'll soon make an end o' the tattle."

Tattle indeed, thought Margery to herself. Oh, it was unbearable! Everyone, it seemed, had been making free with her name; everyone knew how foolish she had been in thus making little of herself to a man who cared not a snap of his fingers for her. He himself had reproved her for those visits of hers which had at first been begun out of pure kindness of heart—how could she have been such a fool as to let pity ripen into love? She herself had not known it, till that very day; would never have known it, perhaps, had it not been for the bitter pain with which his indifference filled her. He had contented himself with a few cold words of warning after discovering the plot against her peace—after that it had been dismissed from his thoughts. He had indeed only warned her when it had struck him that her attitude towards himself might be misconstrued by the village gossips. That very

day, when she had yielded to the temptation of endeavouring to ascertain his feelings, how coldly he had dealt with her. "*I meant it for the best . . . what right had I to interfere? . . . I trusted to your sense of what was fitting.*"

And then the doctor's words, incautiously let fall: "*As I said to him the other day, 'There's not the like of Margery o' the Mill in the country.'*"

She had been practically offered to Farmer Frith, it seemed, by this too officious friend, and he had folded his arms and declined. She raised her eyes suddenly, encountering the puzzled ones of Mrs. Tickell, who stood contemplating her, her head on one side, her hands on her hips.

"You are quite right, granny," she said. "'Tis time for me to choose a husband—I'll choose one this very day, perhaps!"

"My word!" exclaimed the old lady, clapping her hands, with a laugh that was half-pleased, half-puzzled. "That seems quick work, Margery, my dear! Who is it to be, then?"

"I don't quite know myself yet," said Margery.

Almost as she spoke there came a knock at the door, and Mrs. Tickell uttered a little scream.

"Lud! here's a visitor, and I'm a reg'lar sight arter the washin'! I do think it's unconsiderate o' folks to come callin' so early of a mornin'. Run to the door, do, love, while I go and clean me a bit!"

Margery rose languidly, and went slowly to the

outer door, which, on being opened, revealed the laughing face and handsome person of Mr. Harry Westacre.

"You are the very person I wanted to see," said Margery, raising her heavy eyes to his face.

Harry smiled and bowed. "And need I say who 'tis that I have come to visit?" he cried.

He broke off, looking at her curiously. "Is there any special work going on this morning?" he inquired; "any house-cleaning or——?"

His eyes were fixed with evident disapproval on Margery's apparel; she still wore the striped petticoat and short-sleeved cotton jacket which she had assumed that morning in honour of the operations at Edward's house. It was the common working-dress of the village lasses, and Margery but seldom condescended to it. Indeed, it had been donned that morning more in the spirit of frolic than anything else.

"We are usually busy of a morning," returned she; then her eyes rested with a curious, half-sarcastic glance on Harry's attire, which was indeed as much more magnificent than usual as hers was the reverse. "But you are surely very fine to-day?" quoth she.

He ran his hands through his curly locks, and laughed.

"Does not the courting pigeon spread his burnished wings when he comes to woo his mate?" he asked theatrically.

"Step into the parlour," returned Margery shortly; "I'll be with you in a minute."

He strode past her into the narrow passage, the sunlight glancing on his laced garments; a vague perfume emanating from his ruffles and the cobweb-fine cambric handkerchief which he carried in one shapely hand. But if he expected Margery's glance to follow him he was mistaken. On the contrary, she was standing with her back to him, shading her eyes with her hands, and looking towards the opposite side of the yard.

"Rob!" she called.

"Yigh," from the precincts of the mill.

"Come here a minute, will you?"

"Is it summat partic'lar? Because I'm i' th' thick o' my wark jest now."

"Never mind; come here. I want you!"

Rob emerged, but stood a moment hesitating within the mill-house doorway; his face, hair, and dress were thickly powdered with meal.

"I haven't had time to clean me," he remarked.

"Come in at once when I tell you," insisted Margery.

Rob came shambling across the yard, endeavouring to brush the flour from his coat as he advanced; when he was within a pace or two of her, the girl turned and preceded him into the house.

Harry Westacre was already lolling in a polished oaken chair, and looked up in surprise as the miller

followed her into the room. Margery went straight up to the table, and took up a position at the head of it.

"Stand here, Rob," she said, "on my left. Oblige me by getting up, Mr. Westacre; you can stand here on my right. I have something to say to you both."

The two men took up the required positions immediately, and a momentary pause ensued, during which they looked uncomfortably at each other. Margery, too, gazed from one to the other, her eyes positively seeming to shoot forth darts of blue fire. "Sirs," said she, steadying her voice and pressing her clasped hands to her bosom, as though in the endeavour to suppress the wrath with which her heart was swelling,— "Sirs, I have learnt that you both do me the honour to seek my hand in marriage. You, indeed, Mr. Westacre, have for some time been paying me your addresses, but I did not know until this very day that you, Rob—dared to think of me in that way!"

Here, in spite of her resolution, her anger broke forth, and she turned upon her subordinate with a sudden movement like that of a tigress about to spring.

"I'm sure," stammered Rob, wiping his brow, on which the beads of sweat had begun to gather,— "I'm sure I canna think—I dunnot know whoever could have said sich a thing."

With a supreme effort of will she choked down her passion, and gazed at him with calmness.

"Do you deny it?" she asked quietly; "do you deny that you want to marry me? Have you changed your mind?"

Rob stared at her, and a light of rapture broke over his face. Ha! ha! Perhaps, after all, Margery had no liking for Master Westacre's finicky ways; perhaps it was he, Rob, whom she favoured!

"Change my mind?" he cried, thumping the table; and then, with an oath, "Nay, that I havena! Theer's but one lass i' the warld for me, and yon she stands!"

She turned from him with an expression of disgust, which even he, thick-skinned as he was, could not fail to understand, and fixed her eyes on her aristocratic suitor.

"As for you," she said curtly, "since we have but just now spoke on the subject, I cannot doubt your intentions. Well, I have a mind to take a husband, and it may as well be one of you two!"

"What!" cried Harry in a voice of thunder. "You would make me even with your servant? You would hesitate between him and me?"

"Coom, Mester Harry," growled Rob, "none o' yo'r airs and impidence. I'm as good a man as yo', and would maybe mak' a better husband."

"I don't hesitate at all," said Margery, addressing herself to Harry, and speaking very coldly. "I have hit upon a very good way of coming to a decision. I propose to toss up!"

Both men started as if struck, and stood speechless

with shame and confusion, while Margery, fumbling in her pocket, produced a bright new shilling.

"Some little bird hath been carrying tales," said Harry, recovering himself after a moment. "I'll wager 'twas that hypocrite Frith——"

"Never mind who told me," interrupted Margery quickly. "Let us keep to the point, if you please. I have, as you guess, learnt of your pretty doings, and I like 'em so well that I reckon to follow suit. But one word first—I take it you both seek my hand for the same reason?"

"Alack, could there be any but one?" cried Harry. "Sure 'tis love, 'tis love, 'tis love that makes the world go round."

"That indeed?" quoth she. "But I have heard another proverb which sayeth 'Love will not boil the pot,' and that, I reckon, is uppermost in both your minds. I can see as clear as most folks, and I know very well each of you would fain be master of Burchell's Mill. Now, I tell you plain, both of you, I've a mind to be master myself. Unless you understand that, 'tis useless to go farther in the matter."

Harry laughed affectedly.

"What could anyone desire better than to be your slave, most sweet mistress? But I vow I don't fancy this business; 'tis monstrous disrespectful to treat a man of my quality in this way. I object, madam, I say I object to be put on a par with this fellow here. If you have it in your mind to

punish me for a jest which was, I own, badly timed——"

"Jest indeed!" broke out Rob; "'twas sober earnest; him and me very near quarrelled over it. But I agreed to abide by it. 'We both takes our chance,' says he, and then he spun the coin; 'First me, then yo',' says he."

"Just so!" said Margery, with dangerous calm. "I say the same now. Take your chance; it shall be one or the other!"

"I protest!" cried Harry.

"Take your chance, or else take yourself off," she returned imperiously. "It shall be you or him, I say. If one draws back, I take the other."

"Good Lord!" exclaimed young Westacre, shrugging his shoulders. "Well then, for mercy's sake toss the coin and put us out of our pain!"

Margery clutched the coin with trembling fingers, and for the first time her voice faltered as she cried, "Heads, Mr. Westacre! Tails, Rob!"

"Heads!" cried all three simultaneously, as the shilling spun round and round upon the floor.

She turned to Harry and extended her hand. "I am yours!" she said.

He stooped and kissed her hand rapturously, and then made as if he would kiss her cheek; but she started back hastily.

"None of that! No need for any pretence of affection between us. We have concluded a bargain because it suits us both—that's all!"

She turned to Rob, who was standing by with a lowering brow.

"Back to your grinding," cried she.

Later on the same afternoon, chancing to look out of her window, she saw the doctor riding by on his white horse, and quickly ran downstairs and out of the house, reaching the gate at the moment when he was about to pass by.

"Hello!" cried he, turning round in his saddle.

"Doctor," said she, "I've a bit of news for you."

"Have you indeed, and what's that?" inquired the old man, looking in some surprise at her flushed face.

"You told me this morning I wanted a husband to take care of me—well, I have just agreed to take one. Mr. Harry Westacre and me are going to make a match of it."

"*In-deed*," cried Dr. May, his face lengthening in a way that was almost ludicrous. "And will Mr. Harry Westacre make a good miller, think you?"

"I doubt I'll be the best man of the two," returned she. "There need be no more idle gossip about me—that's one good thing. Kindly tell this to all friends who take an interest in me."

"I will," said the doctor, looking at her gravely.

"And tell Mr. Frith that I'm sorry to be obliged to go against his advice, but I reckon Mr. Westacre will make a very good husband."

"I hope so, my dear, I hope so," said the doctor,

rather sadly. "Your mind is quite made up, I suppose?"

"A Burchell's word is as good as a bond," returned the girl proudly. "I don't go back on mine, doctor. Besides," she added after a pause, "isn't it great good fortune for a girl like me to marry a gentleman like the young squire? Isn't he a man that any girl might lose her heart to?"

"He is indeed a very fine—barber's block," returned her friend. "Well, good luck to you. That's all I can say."

"You'll tell Edward Frith!" she called out, as he jogged on again.

"I'll tell him," returned he. "I'll tell him," he repeated to himself, "and the poor, warm-hearted, thick-headed fellow will be more than ever convinced that he was in the right, and that the lass was in love with Westacre all along. But if there ever were a case of biting off one's nose to spite one's face, it is that of Margery Burchell."

CHAPTER XIV

"Is it possible disdain should die, while she hath such meet food to feed it? . . . Courtesy itself must convert to disdain, if you come in her presence."—*Much Ado About Nothing*

SUMMER had come; Margery's crop of grass lay in heavy swathes in the big meadow, and there were no hands to toss it. She had carried her point and taken back the land into her own hands, but a misunderstanding had recently arisen between her and her men, and to her surprise when she came on this particular bright morning into her vast field, she found it absolutely empty.

Now though the day was fine there were not wanting certain signs which betokened a change in the weather. The air was preternaturally warm and still, the swallows flew low, great banks of fleecy cloud were piled at the horizon; these, taken into conjunction with the change in the moon, augured ill for Margery's crop. Many hands would be needed to work energetically to save it, and behold! the great field was empty.

She stood still for a moment, a desolate little figure enough in the midst of the vast expanse; and then stooping, thrust her hand into the ridge of cut

grass at her feet. Her countenance fell as she realised how moist it was; then she set forth towards the mill, running at full speed.

"Rob!" she cried, pausing breathlessly on the threshold. "Rob! There's not a soul in the meadow, and the grass lying there, cut, with no one to make it. Where are the men?"

"I told yo' they'd be off if yo' didn't give in about that beer," said Rob, slowly emerging into the light.

"But why should they have more now than they had in my father's time?" cried she angrily.

"Well, they seem to want more," returned Rob sullenly, "and they reckoned they'd get it. What wi' all these wars, and the press-gang bein' so busy, lads are scarce seemingly. Them that's left can easy get work. I told yo' ye'd best give in."

"Yes, and you told me so before the men, too," cried Margery. "You did it o' purpose, I believe, to make 'em hold out. Well, my hay must be saved. You'd best send for them, and tell them they shall have their beer—though I don't hold with givin' them so much," she added energetically.

"Eh, they'll not be so easy found now," returned Rob, with irritating stolidity. "Bill and Mat, they've been took on by Farmer Lovelady, who's haymakin' too; and Tom, he've gone to Liverpool; and Ben o' th' Lone End was that put out by yo'r doin' him out of his glass last neet, he said he'd have a gradely

do some road, and he went up to the Red Dog and stopped there till owd Tim had to chuck him out. He won't be fit for mich this mornin'."

"What shall we do?" cried Margery, almost piteously. "I'll get the lasses to work at once, anyhow, and a couple of the men here might be spared. Couldn't you take a hand yourself, Rob?" she added. "You're not very busy to-day, are you?"

"I'm busy enough," growled he; "and I didn't engage to do farmwork, what's more. Nay, mistress, I'll bide where I am!"

"Rob, how 'dare you——?" the girl was angrily beginning, when he interrupted her roughly.

"Coom, I've had enough of this mak' of work. I'll do what I engaged for and naught else. I'll carry on the work same as I did in maister's time, but I'll not be ordered here and there jest as yo' fancy, missus. If yo' are not satisfied, I'll go—I'd as lief go as not—I'd soon get as good a place. But if I go what's to become of the mill? Yo'r fine jackanapes of a sweetheart won't work it for yo'!"

Margery stared at him almost blankly; then the colour rushed to her face.

"I believe," she cried petulantly,—"I believe 'tis you, Rob, who put up the men to thwart me just out of spite; but I won't be beaten, I tell you."

Rob laughed gruffly, and withdrew into his own precincts.

"I'll send the lad down to the field if you like," he cried, as Margery was turning away, "but I can't spare John; we've got a big order to deliver to-day."

While Margery sat disconsolately at breakfast, a shadow fell upon the half-drawn blind, and presently Jenny tapped at the door.

"'Tis Mr. Frith, missus! He says if ye'll go out to him he'll nobbut keep you a minute."

There in the spring-cart sat Edward Frith, and behind him two stalwart labourers.

"I've just heard how badly you've been treated, Miss Burchell, and I have come to place my men at your service. I am of little use myself, but at least I can direct, and I've a notion I can manage to do a little tossing. My arms are stout enough, if I am still weak on the legs."

"I thank you most heartily," returned Margery, a little confusedly. "It is indeed good of you, but——"

"Nay, you surely won't refuse my help?" said he, looking at her earnestly.

Even now there was something about the man's eyes and voice which had a strange power over Margery; she had consented almost before she knew what she was doing.

He drove off without waiting for her to change her mind, and she returned to her breakfast with a meditative air.

Half an hour later all her little force was mustered in the meadow; Edward and his underlings, the lad

from the mill, Jenny and her companion, Margery herself, and one or two of the village urchins, who made a deal of noise but apparently did little work.

The air was full of the intoxicating sweetness of the clover; Jenny, wielding her rake lustily, trolled a little song in breathless gasps; some of the boys whistled; Edward went limping about, plying his long-handled fork, and managing to do more than his share of work.

Margery herself toiled feverishly; little of her face could be seen under her gathered white bonnet, but her figure flitted ceaselessly up and down, and she and her rake did incredible service.

By and by Mr. Harry Westacre came strolling across the sunlit field, switching with his little cane at the swathes across which he strode with an easy, elastic tread.

Margery, lifting her head for a moment, glanced first at the graceful, languid figure as it slowly approached, and then at Edward; Edward, whose shirt was open at the neck, whose sinewy arms were bare; each one of whose strenuous movements betokened power—virility. What a contrast!

There was a good deal of sharpness in Margery's tone as she greeted her betrothed.

"You might hurry up a little, I think, seeing we are all so busy."

"The more reason for me to efface myself," returned he, doffing his hat elegantly.

The bright eyes under the limp white bonnet looked forth angrily.

"I can never make sense of those fine words."

"Why, my dear, I mean that if you are too busy to attend to me I had best withdraw till a more convenient time."

"Go away! When every pair of hands is worth a ten-pound note! Since you are here, Mr. Westacre, you will make yourself useful, if you please. You will find a pikel there under the hedge; take it and get to work as soon as possible."

"A pikel?" queried Harry, his blank gaze following the direction indicated by the small, imperative finger.

"A pitchfork, since you are so particular. You'd best take off your coat—the day is warm."

"Warm!" ejaculated Harry in dismay. "Ye gods! I should think it was. What am I to do with the pitchfork?" he continued helplessly.

"The same as the other lads," returned she impatiently. "Use your eyes, sir! Are they good for nothing but ogling?"

"Little vixen!" murmured Harry to himself; "when the knot is tied you shall pay for these impudent speeches. Ogling! quotha. I vow I'd waste no time in ogling if only the money-bags were secure. Faith, I am thrown away on this unmannerly little rustic — but patience, Harry, patience! Once in possession thou mayst do great things. In possession! ha, ha!"

He paused, casting a contemptuous glance at the dark sails of the mill, which could be seen slowly wheeling in a gap between the trees; then he laughed once more, less ill-humouredly.

"I fancy I see myself a miller! But meanwhile it behoves me to turn haymaker, it seems."

He took off his taffety coat, folded it carefully, and laid it in a shady nook beneath the hedge; then he turned up his ruffles, contemplated his exposed wrists for a moment, and pulled them down again.

"Better torn lace than sunburnt hands!" he remarked.

"Now then," called his sweetheart's voice, not without a spice of malice, "to work, Mr. Harry. To work! Exert yourself. You must turn over the swathe completely."

The pitchfork was unmanageable, the sun was hot; Harry's arms, unaccustomed to labour, began to ache in an inconceivably short space of time; moreover, he was uncomfortably conscious that he cut but a poor figure. The stout wenches, vigorously wielding their implements with bare, brown arms, cast sly glances at each other, and sniggered. Margery herself looked at him with rage in her heart.

"He is a fool!" she thought; and her eyes once more sought the stalwart figure at the other end of the field, the figure which went on its toilsome way without even turning its head.

"That's a man!" she said to herself.

At eleven o'clock Mrs. Tickell came staggering into the meadow, carrying a large basket; and before she was half-way across they could hear her strident tones ordering Jenny to run back to the house for the beer-can.

"I can't be expected to carry everything," she grumbled. "This 'ere baggin' is heavy enough, the Lord knows!"

Soon all were seated in the shadow of the hedge, and the "baggin'" was distributed among the workers: goodly slices of bread and cold bacon for the haymakers, male and female; milk and cakes for the mistress. She timidly offered Edward one of the latter, and he accepted it with a smile; yet he did not join her under the sycamore where she sat a little apart from the others, but kept afar off in a corner of a field.

Harry, however, presently came and tossed himself on the ground beside her. He looked, it must be owned, flushed and tired. He accepted a cake, but ate little of it, crumbling it upon the sward. Suddenly he glanced up at Margery.

"Why have you asked that fellow here?"

"Do you mean Mr. Frith? I did not ask him; he offered to come, knowing I was in straits."

"I don't suppose his assistance can be of much value; but I suppose he would be loath to lose such a good opportunity of displaying zeal in your service."

"What are you hinting at, Mr. Westacre?" cried Margery wrathfully. "I have not seen Farmer Frith for over two months until to-day; and surely you can see for yourself how little he relishes my company."

She spoke with a bitterness which she could not repress, and which appeared to astonish her companion. He sat upright, gazing at her for a moment in displeased surprise; then he said tartly—

"You seem mighty piqued at his neglect, Margery; yet each time your humble servant, myself, has striven to approach you, he has been scornfully dismissed."

Margery coloured, but made no response.

"Pray, may I ask," he continued, "if Mr. Frith is aware of the position in which we stand to each other, you and I?"

"No doubt he is aware of it," returned Margery. "You have been at the pains to inform the whole country."

"Does that displease you?" he asked.

"Not at all," answered she, and bit into her cake savagely.

Harry Westacre dropped again into a comfortable position; presently, indeed, he rolled over on his back, and lay for some time gazing upward at the sky through the sycamore's pointed leaves. He was cogitating within himself whether to speak out the indignation long gathering within him at

Margery's attitude towards himself, which had even from the moment of betrothal been cold and distant; or whether, remembering his ever-diminishing exchequer, it would be better to pocket his resentment and plead instead for an early union. After some consideration he decided on the latter course, and rolled over again, the better to gaze into her face.

"Sweetheart!" he said, very softly.

"Sir?" responded Margery.

"How long will you keep me pining? Here we have been promised to each other for more than two long, weary months. Is it not time to make an end of my suspense? Why not fix the day? Love and sunshine go together—let us be made one, my sweet, while yet the flowers bloom."

Margery fixed her direct gaze upon him; she had grown a little pale.

"I told you before, Mr. Harry," she said, "I would not be married till the winter. How could I have the heart to think of weddings and such-like before my father has been a twelvemonth dead?"

"The winter!" exclaimed Harry in dismay. He recalled his empty purse, and his face lengthened.

Margery's eyes had wandered away from him to the farther end of the field. Edward sat leaning back a little wearily; his head was turned away.

"He will not so much as look at me," thought Margery, and she set her face.

"I will marry you in the winter," she said; then, with an inflection of contempt in her voice which she did not try to repress, "If you are short of money before, I can let you have some."

"Money," cried Harry, springing to his feet, "money! Do you think—do you insinuate——?"

She, too, rose and shook out her dress.

"I know," she said over her shoulder, and walked away to resume her labours. Harry looked after her with a very dark face.

"The little jade!" he muttered.

CHAPTER XV

"For in one smile or lower from thy sweet eye
Consists my life, my death, my victory."

THE annual horse-fair at Ormskirk was in full swing one October morning, when Margery, accompanied by a stout labourer, emerged from the inn-yard, where they had put up, into the very thick of the bustle.

It was a very lively scene; the narrow, ill-paved streets were thronged with country-people, who came from miles round to sell or to buy. Horses of all ages and varieties were there, from the magnificent stallion measuring over eighteen hands, to the unbroken colt, raw-boned, hairy-legged, tugging vainly at its halter.

The mistress of Burchell's Mill, intent on carrying out extensive farming operations, had determined to buy a team for her plough, and, moreover, to choose it herself. Her father had often congratulated her on possessing that natural gift, "a good eye" for a horse, and she meant to utilise it on this occasion.

Many of her elder neighbours, farmers of repute, had joined Mrs. Tickell in discouraging Margery's

notion of farming the mill lands; she was therefore the more fixed in her resolve to seek the advice of no one. Of all the labourers who had worked under her father in the old days, Ben o' the Lone End alone remained to her—Ben, whose fidelity had been assured by an additional allowance of beer, and who, with the exception of an occasional spree, was indeed fairly trustworthy and industrious.

But he was vulnerable on some points, and when, by and by, the owners of the more desirable horses, observing that, in spite of her self-confidence, Miss Burchell occasionally turned to her follower for confirmation of her own opinion, made sundry significant signals to him, he deemed it no harm to endeavour to secure "a lucky penny" on his own account.

He lifted his voice, therefore, in enthusiastic commendation of a very handsome, but also extremely expensive, pair of animals, rightly considering that the more money came out of his mistress's pocket, the more would probably find its way to his; concluding by roundly asserting that there was not their like in the fair.

"'Tis a big price," said Margery dubiously.

"'Tis good value, though, missus," said Ben sagely.

"And I doubt they're too young," murmured the girl; "we want a pair that's really well-broken for field-work."

"Eh, ma'am, why should you go weerin' your brass on beasts as is half wore out?" cried honest Ben, winking at the eager dealer from over the girl's shoulder. "Nothin' like the plough for steadyin' a horse."

"The young lady has a real sharp eye," remarked the dealer. "She chose the pick o' my lot in a minute—picked 'em out as quick as if she was a dealer hersel'."

"I was always reckoned a good judge," said Margery modestly.

A man who was making his way through the crowd at some little distance, turned sharply at the sound of her voice, and came towards her. It was Edward Frith.

"Be careful how you deal with that fellow," he muttered in a low voice, stooping over her. "He is the greatest rogue in the country. Let me make the bargain for you!"

He spoke authoritatively, yet with such real interest that Margery did not resent his tone, though she was a little indignant at the implied slight to her own penetration.

"I don't think you could find a handsomer pair," she said.

He looked at them appraisingly.

"They are good-looking enough," he said, "but you want more than that. I have been at such work all my life—if you would trust me, I think I could help you."

He was looking at her very kindly, and somehow her pride melted; in truth, she had been feeling a little alarmed and bewildered.

"Very well," she returned; "I agree."

The dealer was by this time looking very glum, and Ben slunk discreetly to the rear, while the horses were subjected to sundry tests.

Presently Edward rejoined Margery, who had stepped back a little, and taken refuge on a neighbouring doorstep.

"I wouldn't advise that pair," he said; "the off one is a bit touched in the wind, and the other is an ill-conditioned brute. It would take more time and temper to manage him than I fancy many ploughmen possess. Let me choose the horses for you. I'll warrant to pick satisfactory ones."

"If you will be so good," said Margery meekly.

At this moment there was a shouting and scattering of the crowd; a young horse had broken loose and was careering past, kicking and plunging wildly. In the stampede that ensued Margery would have been crushed against the door-post had not Edward interposed his stalwart form, effectually shielding her until the danger was past. Then he turned to her with gentle authority—

"It is too rough for you here; won't you take shelter in the inn? I will come for you as soon as I have found a suitable pair. Let your man take you back now."

Margery acquiesced meekly enough, and Ben,

looking very sheepish, piloted her carefully through the crowd to the inn parlour, where she ensconced herself by the window, looking out at the busy scene, of which, however, she saw little.

How kindly Edward had spoken; there had even been tenderness in his glance. How good of him to take such thought for her! And yet she was no more to him than old Molly—the thought came like a stab. Doubtless he would treat old Molly with just as much consideration if she were in need.

Edward presently, making his way towards the inn, caught sight of the small face peering wistfully through the latticed panes, and quickened his steps.

"She finds the time long," he said.

She turned towards him eagerly as he entered.

"Well?" cried she, as though her mind indeed had been intent on nothing but the new purchase.

"I think I have found just what you want," he announced, "and I hope you'll think I have made a good bargain for you. I am having the horses brought up here for you to see. I want you to have a look at them before I tell you the price the man is willing to take."

He spoke with evident triumph, almost gaily, in fact; and Margery was stimulated to feign even greater interest than she actually felt.

"I vow I am dying to see them!" she cried. "How slow the man is!"

"The crowd is so great they can only get along slowly," returned Edward.

"I'll wager, though, you've not picked out such a bonny pair as I did," she said archly. "Men don't think so much about looks; but to my mind they are half the battle."

A somewhat uncomfortable pause ensued; the same recollection instantaneously flashed across the minds of both. The vision of Harry Westacre as he had strolled up the path to church the previous Sunday, gay with the usual finery, his person displayed to the utmost advantage, his handsome face seeming to challenge admiration, even from the rustics he despised.

Margery blushed vividly. "He will think I chose my future husband for his looks," thought she.

And he, "That handsome fellow will, I fear me, give her a sore heart. But since she loves him, who dares to interfere?"

"Here they come!" he cried aloud, turning once more towards the window. "See—those fine roans. I hope you will like them."

Margery ran to the window, and the two heads looked forth, inadvertently close together.

"Don't you like them?" inquired he presently.

"Indeed I like them much. They are not perhaps so showy as my choice, but they are fine beasts, and I've no doubt far more suited to my purpose."

"And what, think you, is their price?"

Looking at him roguishly, she named a high figure; and he laughed with a little vexation.

"Nay, you are not trying to make a hit."

With an air of assumed innocence she suggested a sum as ludicrously inadequate as the former one had been exaggerated.

Edward's brow cleared. "Come, I'm not to be baited," he cried gaily. "You shan't know the price unless you are in earnest about it."

The elephantine beasts, gay with floating ribbons and quaint decorations of straw, were now stationed beneath the window, and their owner, tilting back his head, loudly inquired of Edward if his lady were satisfied.

Farmer Frith's laughing face instantly became set, and, drawing in his head, he said quietly to Margery—

"The price for the pair is sixty guineas; I think you will find them worth the money."

"That is very reasonable indeed," returned Margery, also stiffening. "I am sure they are worth it. If you will tell the man to deliver them at my place he shall have the money down."

She drew forth a pocket-book, and began to count out the notes upon the table.

"Your man had best take charge of them," said he. "This fellow has many horses here; I doubt if he could spare a lad to lead them."

"Ben is not always to be trusted," said Margery doubtfully.

"I will keep him in view till he is well on the road," said Edward; "our ways lie in much the same direction."

"Nay, as far as that goes I can do so myself," said she. "I can drive the gig slowly, and keep my eye both on Ben and the horses."

"Just as you please," he rejoined coldly, as he turned away.

CHAPTER XVI

"What a fool art thou,
A ramping fool; to brag and stamp and swear."

MARGERY was in her dairy; that newly fitted-up dairy in which she took such pride. She was skimming the cream, an occupation which she always performed herself, taking an almost childish delight in watching the thick yellow folds crinkle over her skimmer, and making it her pride to leave the milk denuded of every vestige of its rich surface. On this particular morning she was bending over the largest of her pans when a shadow fell across the doorway.

"Well?" she said, without turning her head.

"Well, missus," responded the voice of Joe, the cowman, "things seem to be goin' a bit wrong this mornin'. Here's one of our best cows took sick."

"How's that?" cried Margery, turning round, her skimmer poised in mid-air.

"Well, I couldn't rightly tell yo', ma'am. I reckoned they was all as well as could be last neet when I drove 'em into shippon, and this mornin' that big heifer as we bought off Dickinson, she's layin' down in her stall, groanin' terrible, and

shiverin' like an ashpen. Eh, dear, I can't think whatever i' th' world has coom to her!"

"Well, don't stand starin' there, man! Can't you send for John Drench?"

John Drench—so named after his calling, that of a cow-doctor—had a large practice in the neighbourhood; the good folks' faith in his skill being almost superstitious.

"John Drench is down on his back wi' a kind o' a stroke," responded Joe gloomily. "Dunnot so mich as know his own missus, he dunnot. Says he to her t'other day, 'Your eyes is nothin' but twinklers,' says he. The poor wumman were fair broken-hearted about it—sich a thing to say to a wumman! Th' poor owd chap weren't in his reet mind, else he'd never ha' forgot hissel' so."

"But what are we to do?" queried Margery, more occupied with her own misfortune than with the disastrous condition of poor John Drench.

"Well, theer's Mr. Frith, over at Moorside Farm —'twouldn't be so very far to send to fetch him. He's wonderful knowin' about anythin' that's sick. I never see'd the like. Why, they telled me he set a dog's leg t'other day same as if't had been a Christian; and when Dickinson's big ram was took bad he jest took and doctored him as well, or better, than John Drench!"

"Well, send for him," said Margery quickly. "You had best take the gig and fetch him. Ask him very civilly and properly, of course. Tell him

we can't get John Drench, and I should be very grateful to him if he'd be so good as to come."

"Yigh; I'll ax him civil enough," returned Joe. "Mun I go now, missus?"

"Certainly; go at once. I suppose there's no time to be lost."

"Reet!" said Joe, and disappeared.

Margery went back to her cream, but her hand shook, and she took up an undue proportion of milk with each skimmerful. Nevertheless she loitered over her task, seeking to prolong it until after Edward's arrival. But the drive to Moorside Farm and back took longer than she imagined; and the cream had been skimmed, the butter rolled, and even a portion of it made into pats, the pails and other utensils scoured with her own hands, before the sound of wheels announced the return of the gig. Margery cast a discontented glance round; nothing remained to be done. She had no pretext for lingering in the dairy; and, moreover, it was cold there. October was closing in, the well-scrubbed flags were like ice beneath her feet, and the wind blew chill through window and doorway. Perhaps this was why she shivered.

She went out, pausing a moment to lock the door, and recrossed the yard just as Edward alighted from the gig. She shook hands with him, expressing in formal tones her gratitude to him for coming.

"I am always glad to be of service to you,"

returned he, as he loosed the hand which she extended.

He went round with Joe to the shippon, while she entered the house.

"He will think me rude and unmannerly," said she. "I send for him as if he were a servant. I make use of him, and I scarce thank him civilly."

She rushed up to her own room, and there, sitting down upon the bed, gave herself up to thought.

After all, why should she not be kind? He knew nothing, thank Heaven, of what at one time had been in her heart for him. That was over and done with—"over and done with," she repeated aloud. Could she not meet him as though it had never been? He had been her father's friend, and he had more than once shown his desire to be a friend to her. Why not be friends? Why not treat him as she would treat any other man under the same circumstances?

She rose, smoothed her bright hair, changed her working dress for the flowered lilac print of afternoon wear, and then made her way round to the yard, where she found Edward and Joe in anxious consultation outside the shippon door.

"The poor beast has got internal inflammation," said Edward, advancing towards her. "I have given her a drench, and will come again to-night. We may pull her through, but it's a serious case."

"I am very grateful to you," said Margery, in a tone so changed from the frigid one in which she had

previously addressed him, that he started; his face softened and brightened as she went on, "I take it very kind of you, indeed, to come so far; and to spare so much time and trouble to the poor thing."

"Oh, it is nothing," he returned. "I have, unfortunately, not so much to do at my own place as to make it hard for me to get away."

"Then you can't refuse to come in and take some refreshment," she returned, with that new-found brightness of hers. "We are just going to dinner, granny and I."

He hesitated, but seeing her face fall, acquiesced without further demur.

Mrs. Tickell and Rob—who sometimes took his midday meal at the mill-house — were already waiting in the living-room, the former receiving Edward with pleased surprise, the latter, on whom Edward bestowed no recognition, looking dark and sullen.

Margery, however, laughed and chatted without appearing to notice Rob, and was more like herself than she had been for many a day; Edward unbent more and more under her sunny influence.

She was relating some anecdote in a raised voice, interrupted now and then by peals of laughter, when the door suddenly opened, and the brown, curly head of Master Harry Westacre appeared round it. He did not at once identify Edward, who sat with his back to him.

"Why, what festive gathering have we here?"

cried he. "I vow, Mistress Margery, I did not know you were such a rattle. I could hear that little voice of yours going, going, going all the time I was crossing the yard."

She looked at him, mute enough now, and very much out of temper.

Edward rose from his seat and saluted him haughtily. Harry stared at him, and came slowly forward. Their eyes were on a level, for both were tall men, and the glance of each was full of angry defiance. Having prolonged his stare for a full minute, Harry turned aside and dropped into a corner of the settle, stretching out his legs and whistling under his breath.

Margery turned towards him, wrath in every line of her face, in every note of her voice.

"Since you have not the manners to be civil to my guest, Mr. Westacre," she cried, "I desire you will leave the room."

He lolled back in his seat, staring at her insolently.

"Hoity-toity!" exclaimed he. "A pretty speech to your future husband, madam."

"The bargain is not concluded yet," she retorted. "This house is mine, and I won't tolerate your company here if you forget yourself. You presume too far, sir."

"What do you want me to do?" returned he, quailing under the fierce determination of her look.

"Oh, the coward!" thought Margery. "Hasn't he even the courage to defy me? To think that I should be tied to a creature like that."

"I'd have you apologise," she said aloud—"apologise to Mr. Frith for your discourtesy. I insist on it," she cried, for Westacre made a momentary movement as though about to refuse. "Either apologise or leave this house—for good!"

Harry, who had been sitting with a scornful smile on his lips, started at the significant stress upon the last words, and then recovering himself, rose, took a step forward and bowed.

"Since it pleases our pretty mistress," he said with easy grace—"for we are both apparently fellow-slaves—that I should repent me of what she terms discourtesy towards you, I hereby crave your pardon, sir, most humbly, most obsequiously. Having omitted to salute you, I now proceed to do so with entire deference."

He bowed several times with exaggerated flourishes of his laced hat; then, turning, strolled negligently out of the room.

"La! my dear," cried Mrs. Tickell, "I think yo' was a bit hard on the poor young gentleman—meanin' no offence, Mr. Frith. I daresay 'twas an oversight, and I'm sure I'd be loath for any affront to be offered yo' in my grandda'ter's house, but I do think our Margery met ha' spoke to him more gentle-like—them bein' sweethearts an' all. She met ha' took him to task at arter we'd finished, and

when they was by theirselves, and not rated him before us all."

"If it cooms to that," cried out Rob roughly, "I don't see as theer should be one rule for one man and one for another. Farmer Frith theer took no manner o' notice o' me, and I reckon I'm jest as good a man as he."

Edward coloured, and looked towards Margery, more out of countenance than he had been during the whole of the encounter with Harry.

"Then I too was to blame," he said. "I had no right to show myself ill-humoured in your house, Miss Burchell. I beg your pardon."

"Coom, and mine too," cried Rob, with a loud laugh. "Squire Westacre axed yo'rs, and yo' must ax mine."

"And so I do," returned Edward gravely. Then he rose. "I will say good-bye, Miss Burchell—I have trespassed too long on your hospitality, and I fear all this unpleasantness has upset you. For my part, I ought to have known better."

She was indeed white and trembling, but she shook her head mutely.

"I will come again this evening," he said, as he pressed her hand.

CHAPTER XVII

"What she saith ye may it trust
As it by writing sealèd were."

HARRY stood by the mill-door an hour or two later, and signalled to Rob by a peculiar whistle, which the other never failed to recognise, that he wished to speak with him.

"How goes it over yonder?" he inquired, nodding in the direction of the house.

Rob's eyes twinkled from under their lowering lashes.

"I made him 'pologise to me afore I'd done wi' him," he cried. "Yo' should ha' stood up to him, Mester Harry. Says I to missus, 'One man is as good as another; if yo' made young squire 'pologise to Mester Frith, he should 'pologise to me,' says I. And so he did. 'I ax your pardon,' says he."

"Why, what had he done to you?" inquired Harry, reddening; he resented the contempt in Rob's tone.

"Jest same as yo' did to hissel'. Marched past wi'out so much as a good-day."

"Do you think he knows who tripped him up?" inquired Harry in a low voice.

"Not he! How could he? He says hissel' 'twas a goat. Ho, ho!"

"Hush!" cried Westacre, glancing apprehensively round.

"Bless me, squire, yo' haven't the courage of a mouse. There's nobry about, I tell you. The lads is in the top chamber. Yo' did ought to have a bit more sperrit—the lass yon"—nodding towards the house—"'ud think a dale more o' yo' if yo' had. I'd not ha' knocked under to her same as yo' did—I'd ha' seen her domned first. I'd not ha' had Frith put up over my head if I were the sweetheart. He's coomin' again to-neet too. I heared him say so to her."

"Coming again!" cried Harry. "Hanged if I'll stand that!"

"Why don't yo' tell her so then?" retorted Rob. "What's the good o' bargin' at me, an' goin' an' knockin' under to her same as a little lamb?"

"Pooh!" said the other irritably, "it wasn't a real apology, and she knows it wasn't; and so did he."

"If I was yo', Mester Harry," went on Rob energetically, "I'd go to the lass this very minute, and tell her straight out I wouldn't have that chap hanging about the place. 'If I'm not to be maister here,' says yo', 'I'll not have no other,' says yo', bold-like. I'd stand up to her, I know. I'd not knuckle under!"

Harry leaned against the doorpost, switching at his boot with his cane; his well-cut lips sneered

faintly; small lines of cunning showed about eyes and mouth which made his handsome face for the moment look incredibly mean.

"No, no, my friend," he returned, shaking his head slyly; "no, no; you don't catch me. I'm too old a bird to be trapped like that."

"Why, what do yo' mean, sir?" cried Rob, staring in genuine amazement.

"I see your little plan," went on the other waggishly. "It was to be you or I, wasn't it? One down, t'other come on. You'd like me to be down!"

"Sir!" ejaculated the miller blankly.

"In plain English, you'd like me to pick a quarrel with my lady-love, so that when I'm sent to the right-about you may step into my shoes."

"I give ye my word I never thought of no such thing," cried Rob. "I never thought on't," he added, a light suddenly breaking over his face. "But I s'pose 'tis true what ye say, Mester Harry; if 'twasn't yo', I s'pose it 'ud be me. Lord, I'd like it to be me! Wouldn't I make her smart for her sauciness! 'Back to your grindin',' says she. She grinds me, the young hag. She'd grind us all; that's why I'd like to maister her."

"Others can do that perhaps as well as you," returned Harry, with an evil smile. "But we must bide our time; we must get the reins in our hands before we make the jade feel the bit. Well, you are an honest fellow, after all, I believe; I did you

wrong just now. So he's coming again to-night, is he?"

"He's coomin' to-neet," repeated Rob; "would yo' like to turn that goat loose upon the moor again?"

"Too dangerous," said Harry. "There stands my lady in her doorway—I'll go and speak to her."

"Be a bit stiff, Mester Harry, now do!" urged Rob.

Harry crossed the yard with his easy stride, vouchsafing no reply to this parting word of advice, and took off his hat to Margery with his usual flourish.

"Are you still here?" inquired she, turning her shoulder upon him.

"Are you still offended, my pretty one?" queried he.

"I am still offended," returned she gravely. "You know as well as I do that your apology to Mr. Frith was no apology, but rather an insult to me. Don't think, sir, that I was taken in by it, or that your impertinent words escaped my notice."

Her disdainful tone irritated him even more than her indignant words; his temper was not naturally placid, and had hitherto only been held in check by self-interest. As he looked at Margery's scornful face he wondered whether, after all, it might not be as well to follow Rob's counsel, and try the effect of a little self-assertion.

"Madam," he said, raising his voice, "it strikes me that I am the person to be aggrieved. Pray, what other man in my position would show himself so tolerant? I vow I'll not brook your open favour

of a fellow like Edward Frith. 'Tis a shame and a scandal."

"Sir," retorted she, with spirit, "if you must abuse me, it is not needful to shout on the doorstep so that all my folks may hear. Come into the parlour, and say your say quietly."

She preceded him, carrying her head very high, flung open the parlour door, and waited until he had stepped past her into the room; then closing it with great decision, she turned to him with disconcerting abruptness.

"Do you mean me to understand that you are jealous of Edward Frith?"

"Jealous, madam!" responded Harry haughtily. "I?"

His tone was beyond measure insolent; for once his temper was really getting the better of him.

"Yes, you," she retorted. "Are you man enough to be jealous? Have you blood enough in your veins to boil?"

"Pshaw, madam! I fancy I have as good blood in my veins as most men—you, perhaps, are scarcely fit to judge."

"I know, indeed, that I'm no fit mate for you," said Margery, and for the first time in her life, perhaps, her pretty lips wreathed themselves into a sneer. "It is no doubt too much honour for me that you should mend your fortunes with mine. But since you are not jealous of Mr. Frith, I see no reason for this outburst. There'd be no use in *your*

offering to help me, even if you weren't too lazy to think of it. But Mr. Frith can help me, so why shouldn't I consult him? Why do you object?"

"Faith, Mistress Margery, look at the matter in whatever light you will, the fact remains that you will one day bear my name; and I am determined that my wife shall bring no discredit on the family. Yet even before wedlock you begin——"

"How dare you!" cried Margery; her anger of a little while ago was as nothing to the sudden passion of wrath which now leaped up within her.

Looking at the white fury of her face, Harry Westacre quailed.

"Nay," he cried quickly, "I spoke not in earnest."

"If you can say such things even in jest," returned she, in a scarcely audible voice, "if you can harbour such a thought for a moment, I am done with you. Oh!" she cried, turning from him with a shudder of loathing, "I have always hated you, and now—now——!"

"No, no!" he cried eagerly, and fell upon his knees. "I meant no harm, indeed I meant no harm, sweetheart. You taunted me to madness—you goaded me!"

"I am done with you!" she repeated, and in spite of her anger her heart leaped up within her. "I will have none of you, I say. I could never forget this insult—I will never forgive it."

"Come, come," he cried, pursuing her on his knees as she turned towards the door, "you carry

this matter too far. What did I say after all? And half in jest at that—I merely hinted that you were flirting with Edward Frith—and that—— I meant no harm I protest. My temper is hot, and you tried me too much. Let Edward Frith come and go as much as he likes, I'll find no fault with him."

He had clutched her skirts so that she could not escape, and she looked down upon him with a loathing intensified by every word he said. This reptile that would sting and then crawl!

"To tell you the honest truth, Mr. Westacre, I detest the very sight of you."

"Oh, oh," he pleaded, "is not that too cruel? Were any idle words ever punished so sharply, so severely?"

"I hated you before you spoke them," said downright Margery. "Oh! haven't you seen it, couldn't you feel it? Mr. Westacre, 'tis no use; I couldn't marry you now, and wouldn't for all the world."

"But you shall!" he cried, rising to his feet, and looking at her with an aversion scarcely less disguised than her own. "I say you shall. You gave me your word. You made me a solemn promise before a witness. I hold you to it!"

"I care nothing about the witness," returned Margery in an altered voice, "but it *is* true—I gave you my word."

"And you shall keep it, by Heaven!" cried he. "I won't let you off."

She began to pace up and down the room, and he watched her moodily.

"Is it possible," she cried all at once, pausing in front of him, "that you—you are mean enough to bind me to such a promise after what has passed between us? Are you base enough to marry a woman who dislikes and despises you as I do?"

"I will *not* give you up," said he.

She threw out her hands with a passionate gesture.

"I can't!—I can't!"

Then composing herself all at once, she looked him full in the face.

"You can be bought off, I know," she said deliberately. "What is your price?"

The scorn in her voice, even more than the insulting words, roused a certain element of savagery of which the man was possessed, though it had hitherto lain dormant. He looked at Margery as a wild beast might look at its prey, gloating as such an one might gloat before proceeding to rend it limb from limb. The girl was in his power—bound by the meshes of her own honourable nature; not for all the wealth of the world would he set her free. He would keep her, and crush her. Dearly, dearly should she pay for every disdainful look, every insolent word.

"For once," he said, folding his arms coolly, "your penetration is at fault, madam; I am not to be bought. Not for all your fortune would I give you back your promise!"

CHAPTER XVIII

"My love is thine to teach: teach it but how,
And thou shalt see how apt it is to learn,
Any hard lesson that may do thee good."

EDWARD came as he had promised, inspected the sick cow, which he found slightly better, gave full directions to Joe as to its future treatment, and was about to go home, when he remembered having left his riding-whip in the parlour that day. The house-door stood ajar, and receiving no answer to his knock,—for Mrs. Tickell and the maids were busy at the other side of the rambling house,—he stepped in, and after a preliminary tap at the apparently deserted parlour, made bold to enter.

The room was all dark and very cold, and Edward, after vainly peering round, and stumbling over a chair, produced flint and steel and struck sharply.

"Who is there?" cried a voice, a voice which at first he did not recognise, for indeed it was thick with tears.

"It is I, Edward Frith."

There was a movement at the other side of the

room; then—"Don't strike your light," said a voice, "don't, don't!"

"Is it you, Miss Burchell?" cried Edward in amazement. "Why, what is the matter? Has any misfortune come about?"

She did not answer, but he could hear her sobbing in the darkness, and unable to restrain the impulse to see her face, struck and struck again until the tinder flared up.

Lighting the little candle in his tinder-box with a trembling hand, he held it aloft, and descried Margery's figure thrown half across the table, her head hidden in her arms.

He was at her side in a moment, stumbling in his eagerness.

"What is it? What can be the matter?"

Margery sobbed on, without speaking.

"Has anything happened?" he asked earnestly.

She shook her head.

He looked at her, his heart torn with compassion and impotent longing.

"You miss your father, poor lass," he said brokenly. "You miss your good father."

But Margery was too honest to let the supposition pass. She lifted her head, and he was shocked at the sight of her face, swollen and disfigured by violent weeping.

"Nay," she said, "it's—it's not that! I do miss father—eh, that I do—but—I wasn't thinking of him just now."

"And what were you thinking of?" said he very tenderly. "Tell me—perhaps I could help you."

She shook her head very sadly.

"No, no; no one could help me but God, and He won't because I am wicked."

"Nay, that I will never believe," returned he gently.

"Oh yes, I am wicked and foolish. It is very hard to do right," she added disconsolately.

"Indeed it is," said he, with a heartfelt sigh.

Margery drew her hand across her wet eyes as though to clear their vision, and then fixed them on the kind, compassionate face that was looking down at her.

"Mr. Frith," she said in a tembling voice, "when it is very—very hard to go on doing right, is one bound to do it? When it almost breaks one's heart —when you feel as if it would kill you?"

He was silent for a moment, looking at her.

"Must one?" she repeated.

"I'm afraid," said he, "there is only one way of looking at such things; one must not give up doing right because it is hard."

She rose quickly, smoothing her ruffled hair, and shaking out her dress with an unconcerned air, though her lips were trembling.

"I have had a fit of the blues," said she. "I don't know why I was so silly. How is the cow, Mr. Frith?"

The would-be lightness of her tone, contrasting with the woefulness of her poor little disfigured face, cut Edward to the quick. He caught her by the hands with a groan.

"You think me hard, I know," he said, "but I—I can only say what I honestly believe. God knows," he added tremulously, "no one finds it harder to do right than I."

"You!" cried Margery, with a shrill little laugh, "you never did wrong in your life!"

By the light of his taper she could see his expression change, and knew she had hurt him; he let her hands fall and stepped back, and somehow the action enraged her.

"My trouble is not one," she said harshly, "that you could either end or mend. But you have not told me how the cow is, and I suppose that is what you came for."

"I am glad to say the poor beast is better. No, I did not look to find you here, for I saw that all the lights were on the other side of the house. I came to look for my whip, which I left behind me this morning. Ah, there it is on the window-seat. I must apologise for disturbing you—good-bye."

He made no attempt to shake hands, and she stood motionless, as he picked up his whip and went out, blowing out his little taper on the threshold.

The night was cold, a white frost already covering the ground, but Edward's blood was fevered as he strode along.

To see her suffer thus, and to be unable to help her; nay, to feel that his response to her appeal had not only incensed her, but plunged her into further depths of despair—never in all his life had he been so miserable.

Why had he not questioned her further? Why had he not insisted on her confiding in him? Had he but known her trouble, he might at least have been able to speak some words that would have soothed and comforted her. After all, she was little more than a child, and she had no one to turn to. Mrs. Tickell? A nonentity. Rob? He had seen for himself what a split reed was Rob. Harry Westacre? He, who should be her nearest and dearest,—the sharer of her sorrows as well as of her joys,—had she thought of confiding in him? Edward strode along the faster, the notion somehow was unendurable to him. How would he respond to such confidence, shallow, vain, selfish, as he was? Harry Westacre. Could it be that her trouble was even connected with him? He stopped short, overpowered by the thought; but almost instantly dismissed it. The lass loved him too well for that; whatever his faults, there was no doubt she loved him. She had chosen him of her own free-will, and it could be for no other reason than because she had lost her heart. The young man's penniless condition was common talk, and Margery was not the girl to be dazzled by his rank. He was certainly a handsome fellow, and what with his

good looks, his glib tongue, and the charm of manner he had when he chose to exercise it, it was little wonder that she had been captivated. She was not the first to be attracted by such things. And, after all, there might be good in the fellow; there surely must be good in him, else she had not fallen in love with him.

But again he would think of her as he had seen her by the flickering taper, with her little face so small and drawn, and her swollen eyelids. Poor Margery! Poor little lass! Whatever was troubling her she was fair breaking her heart. And he had left her uncomforted. What if he were to go back now, even now? She might perhaps speak out her grief, and at least she should know that he sympathised.

With an impulsiveness far from habitual with him, Edward turned, and began to retrace his steps, covering the ground with long, rapid strides.

He was still some way from the mill when, through the silence of the night, the sound of other footsteps fell upon his ear—light, pattering steps advancing at a run; in another moment he heard a voice, Margery's voice, calling to him—

"Edward! Edward Frith! Come back — I want you!"

He could see her now, even in the shadow of the trees, a little flying figure; her white apron fluttering behind her, her hands outstretched.

In an instant he stood beside her, clasping those hands in his strong warm grasp—little ice-cold hands!—how they trembled in his.

"Edward," said Margery, her breath coming quick, partly because she had been running so fast, partly because she was moved. "Edward, I—I ran after you to say I have done very ill in speaking to you as I did. You meant to be kind, and I was cross and unmannerly."

"Nay, my dear," returned he; "I am but grieved that I should have to stand by like a stock or a stone while you are in such trouble. I wish I knew what is your trouble, lass. Couldn't you make shift to tell me?"

He was holding her hands still, and again they fluttered like birds seeking to take wing. Unconsciously he tightened his grip.

"Tell me," he cried.

"I know you are a true man," she said, "and I fear you'll say there is no way out of it. I have always tried to act honestly, and my father before me. I know he'd say the same; and you couldn't counsel me, any more than he, to break a solemn promise even if I rued it."

In the still darkness they could hear the tumultuous beatings of each other's hearts.

A promise! thought Edward; a promise that she rues! Can it indeed be her promise to Harry Westacre?

And then came another thought, like a lightning

flash. My God! why does she not ask advice from anyone but me?

Margery drew away her hands slowly.

"There can only be one answer, I know," she said tremulously. "You'll tell me, as my father would have done—that I can't break my word!"

He paused a full minute. It was too dark to see his face, but it seemed to her that his very form looked rigid and uncompromising as it towered above her.

"I cannot tell you anything else," he said. "To me a promise willing given is as binding as an oath!"

She pressed her hands to her bosom.

"It is what I expected," she said after a pause. Then she tilted up her little face, and for a moment he saw her eyes shining. "It's just like you to say that."

"Believe, at least, that I am sorry," he said, his voice breaking a little. "I know I seem hard, and yet if there was anything in the world that I could do to help you, it should be done. I—I—no words can say how I feel for you!"

"And yet," she answered, with a sad little laugh, "you do not even know what my trouble is." Then, with a change of tone, "Girls' troubles are not worth counting, are they? So you men-folk think. A new bonnet or a pretty breast-pin will set all to rights!"

"I wouldn't do you such injustice as to think you were in earnest," said Edward.

"I'm not in earnest, but for all that I can't tell you my trouble. Another man might guess it—but not you!"

"Nay, then," he said, with sudden sternness, "since you have gone so far you shall tell it to me. There's times when a man can't hold himself. Come, I'll hear this tale now!"

Margery, wilful and masterful as it was her custom to be, was, as has already been said, conscious of some compelling power in this man to which she invariably yielded. She yielded now.

"My trouble is," she said in a low voice, "that I don't love Harry Westacre!"

"My God! And you'd marry him!"

"I will marry him," she said firmly. "I gave him my word solemnly, and after due thought. I asked him to-day to release me, and he refused. Now you know everything!"

Edward stood silent and motionless.

"You, yourself, told me a moment ago," said Margery, "that a promise should be as binding as an oath——"

"But to marry without love," groaned Edward; and his resolution wavered for a moment. "To marry—to give yourself for all your life!"

She thrust out her arms as though to keep him off, for his very form seemed to sway, and he had made an impetuous step towards her.

"Edward," she cried, "you won't be the one to advise me to break my faith!"

"No," said he, drawing back, "I won't advise you to do that, yet—my God! will you swear to cleave to this man—when you have no love for him? How can that be?"

"Perhaps God will send me strength," said she. "I mean to do it, Edward Frith."

They faced each other in silence; Edward battling with himself, Margery watching him with a kind of vague curiosity. For the moment she felt insensible, as it were irresponsible. She had burnt her ships and accepted the inevitable. Edward's emotion touched her but faintly. Even if it were something stronger than compassion which wrought within him, what would it avail now? Her fate would be the same.

"I mean to do it," she repeated presently in a dull voice.

Then, with a sudden cry, he turned from her and fled into the darkness.

CHAPTER XIX

ON the following morning, as Harry Westacre was endeavouring to while away an hour out of his tedious day by witnessing a cock-fight, a message was brought to him from his sweetheart. Miss Burchell, he was informed, desired to speak with him urgently, and would be obliged if he would call at the mill as early as convenient that forenoon.

"A likely tale, indeed!" said the young gentleman, turning on his heel contemptuously. "Tell your mistress, boy, that I'm engaged at present, and that I cannot spare the time to visit her till this afternoon."

This was pretty cool certainly. After the impertinent, almost insulting, manner in which she had treated him yesterday, to think that he would be willing to fly to her side at the first lifting of her finger. Let her cool her heels for a little—'twould do her good.

Nevertheless he could not help wondering what she wanted him for; and a certain sense of uneasiness underlay his merriment during the remainder of that morning, though he might well have enjoyed

the main, for it was, as declared one or two of the choice spirits whom he had there convened, one of the finest and bloodiest battles that had been seen for many a day, and his adversary's bird received severe usage from his own.

They celebrated the victory by a heavy dinner and sundry potations, and the autumn dusk was already setting in when Mr. Westacre found leisure to attend the summons of his betrothed. He found Margery sitting in the best parlour, attired in her Sunday gown and looking pale and serious.

It was not her custom to treat him ceremoniously, and he was more perturbed than he would have cared to own at her grave manner and unaccustomed surroundings, which seemed to portend an occasion of unusual solemnity.

"Well?" he said, throwing himself into a chair.

"Mr. Westacre," began Margery stiffly; then her voice faltered, and she continued, with unlooked-for gentleness, "You have kept me waiting long, Harry. I looked for you to come sooner."

Feeling somewhat ashamed, he muttered something about having been detained by an important engagement.

"Yes, I know," she rejoined,—"a cock-fight. Oh, Harry, are we to go on like this? Railing at each other, wearied of each other, each tugging vainly at the bond which holds us. As you know, I'd be fain to set you free—but if you won't agree to that——"

"I certainly won't agree," he interrupted, regaining his self-possession in a measure; "we thrashed out that matter yesterday."

"Well then, let's try to make a fresh start. If we've got to spend our lives together, let's try to make the best of each other, to like each other better. You did like me once, and I——"

She stopped short. She had meant to say "I liked you too," but, somehow, the words would not come. Harry, who had been watching her attentively, smiled to himself.

"And you liked me, no doubt," he said. "Well, my dear, there's sense in what you say. I'm glad to find you so much better disposed this afternoon. Come, now, supposing we put your good resolutions to the test—let's get married straight off."

"Married!" exclaimed Margery. She laid a finger on her trembling lip, and appeared to reflect for a moment. Would it indeed be better to brave the worst at once? But her courage failed her.

"I couldn't do that," she said. "I couldn't get wed before my father was dead a year. I've told you that over and over again."

"So you did indeed, but as you sent for me, I fancied you might have altered your mind. Well, my love, I don't really know why you were in such a prodigious hurry to see me, for I protest you don't seem to have much to say. You profess great meekness, yet you refuse to grant the one request I make, though you know how inconvenient this delay

is to me. Since we are to be all in all to each other, I'll have no secrets from you. 'Tis monstrous inconvenient for me to wait so long."

Margery clasped and unclasped her hands nervously. The room was lighted only by a pair of wax candles on the tall mantelshelf, and, whether from this reason or because of her emotions, her face looked pale and haggard.

"As you are so soon to be my husband," she said, "and will have a right—will have a right——"

She paused.

"Go on," he said encouragingly. He rather approved of the turn the conversation was now taking; particularly as Margery spoke with due deference, and had evidently no intention of twitting him, as she had done on a former occasion.

"As you will so soon have a right to share my fortune," she continued, "and since—and since you are now in straits, could I not give you a note to my attorney, Mr. Lupton, asking him to make over some of my money to you now?"

"Certainly you could," said Mr. Westacre in an approving tone. "'Tis very well thought on, sweetheart. I could ride to Upton to-morrow and have a talk with the old chap, if you'll make me the bearer of a note."

"Then how much shall I desire him to give you?" said Margery.

She had risen, and was crossing the room to fetch her little desk.

"Why, let's see. I'd best think the matter over, and let old Lupton know how much I require."

"Nay, I don't think that would do," rejoined the girl. "Mr. Lupton is very particular; he will not send me money for my own needs unless I let him know the exact sum and what 'tis wanted for. Shall I say ten guineas?"

"Ten guineas!" echoed Harry, with a dropping jaw. "That wouldn't see me very far."

"Ten guineas is a deal of money," said Margery in a reproving tone. "What do you want it for, Harry? If it is for your debts, would it not be better to make a list of them? I daresay we could pay them off gradually. 'Twouldn't be wise to spend too much money all in a lump."

"You are a paragon of wisdom," said he, with a sneer. "I wasn't thinking of my debts — though that matter, no doubt, will have to come later. I was thinking of my immediate needs, my private expenses. Hang it! a man like me should have some money to put in his pocket."

"But wouldn't ten guineas do to put in your pocket?" persisted Margery.

"Oh, hang your ten guineas! Make it twenty, for shame's sake. I've no mind to go bothering Attorney Lupton too often!"

"Well, it shall be twenty," agreed Margery. "I'm afraid Mr. Lupton will think it very extravagant. My poor father thought many times before he laid out twenty pounds."

"See here, Margery, make it twenty-five, and I'll take you to Liverpool, and we'll have a merry day for once. You're getting moped sticking in this quiet place, month in, month out. Come, make it twenty-five, and I'll hire the prettiest chaise that can be had for money and take you into the town to see the sights. Yes, and I'll buy you a present too—'gad! I've never made you a present yet. Twenty-five guineas; you'll never miss them, you sweet little miser. If report says true, you've as many bags of gold as you've bags of flour. Come, write the note, and I'll hie me to Upton to-morrow, and next day you'll see what a fine equipage shall come clattering into the yard here. Damme! it'll make the rustics stare. Make yourself very fine to do me honour. The folks will be all agog. Come, where is that note? Don't hang back, child, else I'll think all your fine promises are moonshine."

"I'll write the note," said Margery, after a moment's struggle, "but I don't know as I've much inclination to go pleasuring."

"Now, now, you'll not be so ill-natured—'tis the first time I've ever invited you to come for a jaunt with me. I protest we'll never get on if you're for moping and staying at home when I beg for your company."

"Very well then, I'll go," said she in a dull voice.

She wrote the note, and handed it to him, and he pocketed it with a careless laugh.

"That's settled. Now we understand each other

better. Away dull care! All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy—and Jill too. You'll see how merry we'll be together after our little outing."

He caught her hand and kissed it with a loud, smacking salute; then, as he rose to go, he flung his arm carelessly round her waist: "We are getting to know each other better now, eh? You'll see how comfortably we'll jog along in double harness."

Leaning over her, he kissed her cheek in the same rough, perfunctory manner, and, catching up his hat from the table, departed, singing as he went.

Margery stood still for a moment, then drawing out her handkerchief, scrubbed vigorously, first her cheek and then her hand. Then, still dissatisfied, she rushed to the back kitchen, where her grandmother presently found her at the pump.

"Bless me, child, whatever art thou doing? Splashin' water all over thy best silk dress!"

"I've been washing my face," said Margery, burying her hot cheeks in the round towel.

Great indeed was the astonishment of Margery's neighbours when, a day or two later, a strange-looking vehicle came clattering into the mill-yard. It was not a chaise such as he had spoken of, nor even a chariot like Squire Westacre's of Leith, but a tall, yellow-painted, odd-looking vehicle, perched high on immense wheels.

"'Tis a curricle," said Harry, in response to Mrs. Tickell's astonished query. "I got it out from

Liverpool. It'll go a rare pace, and these horses are spankers."

Mrs. Tickell came out on the doorstep, and Harry noticed for the first time that she wore her best silk gown, and a thick shawl and a gathered silk hood, under which the borders of her mob-cap were visible.

"I'll never trust myself in that thing," she announced firmly, "not if you was to go down on your knees to me, I wouldn't."

"Well, I wasn't aware that you were invited," said Harry roughly. "Nay, damme! you're scarcely the figure for a curricle. I think we'll leave you at home, old lady."

But Margery, who at this instant issued from the house, was of a different opinion, and a lively altercation ensued, the girl asserting that it would not be seemly for her to go so far from home unaccompanied by her grandmother; the young man insisting that there was not room for her in his curricle, and that, moreover, he would not be seen in the town with such a homely old body.

It was Mrs. Tickell herself who put an end to the discussion.

"Theer, lass, theer's not a bit o' use in arguefying," she said. "Don't go for to anger the yoong squire. I'd a deal sooner bide at home. If him an' you's so soon to be man and wife theer can't be no harm in yo'r trustin' yo'rself to him for one day."

"Well done, granny," cried Harry, with more

good-humour than he had hitherto shown. "That's the most sensible thing you've said yet. Come, Margery, don't be a prude. I'll take just as good care of you as if you had fifty duennas at your back."

Margery made no further protest, but submitted to be helped to her high perch; and they drove off, leaving Mrs. Tickell standing on the step, her pride at the fine figure her granddaughter was cutting a good deal dashed by the humiliation of being left behind.

"But I am sure I am thankful not to be cocked up in that queer-lookin' trap," she said to herself, "and the yoong squire's not such a very steady head on's shoulders. 'Tis to be hoped he'll bring the lass back safe. Eh, well, when she's wed to him she'll have to let him tak' her what jaunts he pleases, so there weren't a bit o' use her howdin' back now."

And with this philosophical reflection she turned indoors.

CHAPTER XX

"Good-bye, proud world! I'm going home;
Thou art not my friend; I am not thine:
Too long through weary crowds I roam:—
A river ark on the ocean brine,
Too long I am tossed like the driven foam;
But now, proud world, I'm going home."

IN those days a drive along a north-country road was an experience fraught with as much pain as pleasure, particularly in late autumn, when wheels, and even horses, occasionally sank almost up to their middle in mud, and even the drier portions of the causeway were of the most uneven and bone-jolting description.

Margery was very much alarmed indeed at first, and, forgetful of all save her terror, clung to Harry's arm when, as occasionally happened, the ill-broken horses turned restive in the middle of a morass, or an unexpected jerk threatened to send a wheel flying from its axle.

At such times as these Mr. Westacre reproved her with some ill-humour, declaring at last, in loud tones, that if she did not leave his elbow free they'd both find themselves uncommon soon spilled in the road.

"And I've no mind to break my neck, if you have," he added, with an oath. Then he turned and looked at her sneeringly. "Why, what in the world's come to you? I thought you were a girl of spirit."

Margery made no reply, but sat very still, and clung to the side of the vehicle instead, wishing with all her heart that she had some more considerate neighbour. Dr. May, for instance, or Mr. Lupton; and then the thought flashed across her of how anxious Edward Frith had been to escort her home from Ormskirk Fair. He would not have been rough with her, or mocked at her fears. She had had no fears on that day; she had not used to be timid. What, indeed, had become of her spirit? It had sustained her during the first weeks of betrothal to Harry Westacre, but with the gradual disappearance of her foolish resentment against Edward's attitude, and her deepening conviction of Harry's unworthiness and her own irretrievable mistake, it seemed to have melted away. She was actually growing physically nervous as well as depressed. She was just beginning to wonder dismally if this growing weakness might not portend some bodily infirmity, which might carry her to an early grave, and to say to herself that that might be the best thing which could happen to her after all, when the young squire's voice broke in upon her meditations.

"Now then, sit up, for goodness' sake, and don't

look as if you were going to a funeral. We're out for a day's pleasure, egad! Can't you contrive to be a bit more cheerful?"

Margery braced herself, and turned towards him with a faltering smile.

"That's better! Come, we're just there now—we'll walk about a bit first, and then we'll have some dinner, and then we'll go to a puppet-show if you like, or some other sights."

They were clattering over the ill-paved streets now, and presently drew up in the yard of the King's Arms Inn. Throwing the reins to an ostler, Harry assisted Margery to alight with his most gallant air. He felt a certain pride in her pretty looks, and in the wonder and admiration which they provoked from the servants and idlers who were hanging about the yard. He was well known in the place, and his sudden arrival with a female companion aroused a good deal of curiosity. Setting on his hat at its most knowing angle, and giving the girl his arm, he went swaggering out of the yard, and after traversing many meaner streets, piloted her to one of the more fashionable thoroughfares. Margery began to be amused, and even excited. The fine shops, the handsome carriages, even the appearance of the pedestrians, which differed so much from that of the country-folks to whom she was accustomed, were all sources of interest to her. Her little head was turned this way and that, and occasionally, in her desire to

loiter, she hung upon Harry's arm after a fashion which would have irritated him had he not been pleased and flattered by the attention which their own appearance provoked.

At last her naïve encomiums on a piece of silk displayed in a mercer's window prompted him to respond with a generous air.

"Did I not promise that you should have something to remember this outing by? To be sure, so I did. Come in, my dear, and make your choice."

They stepped together into the shop, and being accommodated with seats by the counter, were immediately attended by an obsequious assistant.

Margery's experience of shopping had been limited to an occasional visit to the country-town before mentioned, where, besides a drapery establishment, there was a mantua-maker. The goods supplied by these worthies were chiefly of a serviceable nature, and did not boast of much variety. The girl, who was possessed of a true feminine love of finery, was dazzled by the shining wonders now set out before her: the sprigged silks, the delicate muslins, a rich brocade that, the shopman declared, would stand alone, a cobwebby crêpe, so exquisitely light in texture that the whole piece, as he pointed out, might be drawn through a lady's wedding-ring.

"He has found us out, you see, my love," said Harry, full of self-importance, and delighted at

attracting so much attention, for, indeed, not only the shop-assistants but many of the customers were gazing with good-natured smiles at the handsome young couple.

Margery heaved a little sigh; the words recalled her to a sense of her position, and she bent over the rich materials in order to hide her downcast face.

"I think this silk with the little yellow flower would be most suitable," she said, when Harry pressed her to make a choice.

"Nay, that is a flimsy thing. Why not this brocade?"

"'Tis too expensive—and the other would really, I think, be more becoming for me."

"Your lady is but young yet," said the shopman, with an ingratiating smile. "She can wear these rich materials later on. Not but what this is a very handsome thing. Her Majesty Queen Charlotte has a court robe of the same pattern, but on a snuff-coloured ground."

"Don't you really like it, Margery? To my mind it's vastly superior to that sprigged trifle. Well, since we don't agree, I'll tell you what we'll do. I'll buy me enough to make a waistcoat. 'Twill make a monstrous fine waistcoat. Cut me off enough for a waistcoat, shopman, and the sprigged piece for the lady."

"Will your honour please to pay for them now?"

Mr. Westacre drew his purse from his pocket, and

flung it on the counter, where the gold pieces were plainly to be seen glittering through the silken meshes. Then catching it up again, and tossing it once or twice in the air, he restored it to his pocket.

"Nay, 'pon my soul, I think we'd best get old Lupton to pay for it," he remarked carelessly. "We might run short of ready cash, and 'twould never do to run short of cash when we're out for a day's pleasuring. You'd best send your account to Attorney Lupton," he added, turning to the man. "He lives at the corner of the Market Place, Upton. You know Upton?"

Yes, the man not only knew Upton, but was well acquainted with the attorney by name, it being the habit of one or two of their lady customers to transact business through Mr. Lupton.

"Very well then," said Harry, "send in your account to Attorney Lupton, and forward the parcel to the King's Arms Inn before three o'clock, so that we may carry it home with us."

He was about to turn away when Margery twitched him by the sleeve.

"But surely," she said, "I understood this was to be a present, Harry?"

"Well, and so it is," he rejoined, laughing.

"Well, but how, then, are you going to manage about payment? I don't understand."

"Why, old Lupton will pay for it, you dear little goose."

He bent over her, whispering in her ear, but Margery drew back.

"Pay for it—out of my money! Is that how you would make presents?" Her north-country shrewdness rebelled at what she felt to be trickery, and she turned indignantly to the shopman.

"There has been a mistake," she said. "I do not require that piece of silk, and Mr. Westacre will settle for the brocade now."

"I'll do nothing of the kind," said Harry. "The lady is of a thrifty turn of mind, and is troubled with scruples of conscience," he added, with a forced laugh. "But I'm hanged if she shan't have a pretty gown in spite of herself. Come, my dear; come, madam."

He drew her arm through his so forcibly that she could not hang back without making open show of resistance; and deeming it best to submit for the moment, she suffered him to lead her out of the shop.

"'Pon my soul!" he exclaimed angrily, as soon as they reached the street, "I wonder you are not ashamed of yourself! I vow you put me to the blush before all those staring folk. Said I not well you were a miser, grudging me even the dole I had so painfully extracted!"

"Well, I have no real need of the dress," said Margery, with some of her old spirit, "and I have no mind to accept gifts that must be paid for by myself."

"Then, my dear, that will have to be your fate in future," retorted Harry, who was striding along so fast that she had difficulty in keeping pace with him; "if you've a mind to have gifts at all. You know very well I have not a penny-piece to back my name. But, lud! I'll get you out of such stingy ways. I'll make some of that hoard of yours fly. I'll show you who's master!"

"You shall have an allowance," said Margery. "You may make that spin as fast as you like, but you'll only get it paid out at the proper times. I promised to wed you, but I did not promise to let you ruin me—and I won't!"

"You little vixen!" cried Harry, stopping quite still to glare down at her. "You'd threaten me, would you?—you think to hold the whip-hand because you hold the purse-strings? When we come to measure our strength we'll see who wins."

Nevertheless he was uneasy, partly because of a secret, uncomfortable doubt lest Margery might after all be able to control his expenditure; partly because of her rebellious attitude, which her recent weakness rendered the more unexpected and unwelcome. Neither of them spoke after this, and he continued to hustle her along at an inconveniently rapid pace until they reached the King's Arms. Here some of Mr. Westacre's good-humour seemed to return, as he ordered a plentiful repast and abundance of wine to be set ready for them in a private room.

Margery could eat but little, and her thrifty soul, which had already been severely mortified, as we have seen, received fresh affront in noticing that Harry himself sent away untasted more than one of the costly dishes he had ordered. He made up, however, for abstemiousness in one direction by excess in another. His transitory gleam of geniality appeared to have left him on sitting down to table, and the "drawer" was summoned several times to open fresh bottles, none of which afforded the young gentleman satisfaction. Nevertheless he drank of all, and, when he finally ordered a bowl of punch, Margery became really alarmed.

"Pray do not forget, Mr. Westacre," she said pleadingly, as the servant withdrew to compound the mixture, "that we have a long rough road before us. You will need to have all your wits about you to guide those wild horses, and 'tis past three o'clock now—'twill be dark in another hour."

"Pshaw!" cried Harry. "What, you would grudge me even my food and drink, I suppose! I've been half-poisoned by the villainous stuff the folks here call port and burgundy. I must have a glass or two of punch, if 'tis but as a corrective. Nay, I protest you're like the skeleton at a feast. A pretty feast, indeed, and a pretty day's pleasuring! Devil a bit of pleasure's been in it for me! Grumblings, complainings, whinings, and a long face even at the dinner-table! 'Tis enough to make a man's food choke him, and turn good liquor to

vinegar. As for the stuff I've been drinking, it's enough to poison me, I say."

The entrance of the drawer, carrying a steaming bowl, put an end to his harangue, and it was in a more cheerful tone that he inquired if any young gentlemen of his acquaintance were by any chance found on the premises.

"'Tis a thousand pities to drink alone," he added. "A bowl's not a bowl unless you've got a friend to share it with you."

"Why, there's young Master Etheridge in the tap-room this very moment," returned the fellow.

"Etheridge! Billy Etheridge? Desire him to come up immediately! By George, what a lucky chance! I protest I haven't seen my friend Billy for an age."

"Hadn't I better withdraw?" said Margery, half-rising from her seat.

"What for? You'll like Billy Etheridge very well. He's a great crony of mine. You'd best like him, for 'tis probable you'll see a deal of him. Here he comes! Billy, my boy, well met!"

"Well met indeed, my buck," rejoined Mr. Etheridge, in somewhat thick tones, as he came rolling across the room. 'Twas evident, indeed, that he had not wasted the time which he had spent in the tap-room. "Why, whom have we here?" he continued, staring at Margery. "By jingo! a comely baggage,—at your old games, Harry, I perceive."

"Nay, nay," said Harry quickly. "I'm a reformed character now. This lady is Miss Burchell, my future wife."

"Oh, indeed," said the other, with sudden gravity. Pulling himself together, he bowed to Margery in as courtly a manner as his inebriety would admit of, and seating himself, gazed gloomily at his host.

"There's your tumbler, man; drink it off—'tis a deep bowl, and we must see the bottom of it before we separate."

"I thank you," said Etheridge in mincing tones; and then, turning to Margery, he made some demure remark about the weather.

"'Tis very unsheasonable for time of year," he said; "very unsheasonable."

"'Tis November surely," said Margery.

Mr. Etheridge fixed a glassy eye upon her, and seemed to cast about in his brain for a further subject of conversation; inspiration failing him, however, he lifted his glass to his lips instead.

The fumes of the punch were beginning to circulate about the already close room; Margery pushed back her chair, feeling that she could not endure the atmosphere for another instant.

"Now then, wake up, Etheridge," cried Harry, without noticing her. "Can't you think of something lively to tell me? I vow I'm feeling as dull as ditchwater myself. Come, let's have a song; you mind that capital song of yours—

'"'Twas a roaring lad and a jaunty lass——'"

"Harry," broke in Margery, with trembling lips, "I'm going out in the air for a while; this room is stifling hot. And do, please, remember the time, and bethink you of the journey before us."

"Nay, 'tis just what I want to forget," retorted he. "But go into the air, by all means.—Now then, Billy—

"'Twas a roaring lad and a jaunty lass.'"

As Margery hastened from the room, Mr. Etheridge's voice was uplifted in a kind of husky bellow, and she ran down the passage as quickly as might be to place herself out of hearing.

Women were not over-squeamish in those days; Margery had seen her honest father and his cronies the worse for liquor more than once, but always in a respectable way. Mrs. Tickell and she had left the men-folk to themselves on such occasions, and though voices might be raised and liquor flow freely, there was no uproariousness—nothing violent or unseemly. But the sodden creature who had but just now seated himself so near her, whose voice was now trolling forth a ditty which, as she instinctively felt, was more than likely to set decency itself at defiance, this was company which she did well to avoid. Yet, if Harry spoke truly, it would frequently be forced on her in the future. As for Harry himself, how ill-humoured he was—how rough, almost brutal, in his manner towards herself! And a rogue, too—a dishonest rogue at heart. That business at the silk

mercer's, insignificant though it was, seemed to her to unmask his character. And he was to be her life's companion. Had she not pledged herself to him? To the poor, misguided child her plighted word had a sacramental value which could not be broken without dishonour and sin.

She found herself in the yard now, and was disagreeably conscious of the curiosity which she excited. If she had been stared at before, when in Harry's company, her reappearance alone provoked many more wondering looks and whispering comments. She paced up and down over the cobblestones, keeping her head bent and drawing her mantle closely about her. She would have done better, perhaps, to have asked to be conducted to some room where she could await Mr. Westacre's pleasure in greater privacy; but she felt too shy to make her way indoors again, dreading, as she did, the questions which must ensue, and the surprise which her forlorn plight must awaken. After some time, during which she had accompanied her melancholy perambulations with still more melancholy reflections, she was startled by observing that one of the stablemen was lighting the lantern which was affixed to the wall; another man hurried past, lamp in hand, and turning towards the house, she discovered that lights shone from many windows. Dusk was, in fact, closing in. It was time, more than time, to set forth on their return journey.

She hurried back to the room where she had left

Westacre. The semi-recumbent form of Mr. Etheridge lay on the ground, propped against the chair on which he had previously been sitting; he was sound asleep, with his head sunk on his chest. Harry, sprawling over the table, was still busy with the punch. A second bowl of this beverage had been evidently supplied to him, for the other, quite empty, lay overturned at the farther end of the table.

Margery spoke to him sharply enough, for her terror lent her courage. Receiving no answer, she approached him and shook him by the arm, and he made some surly, inarticulate rejoinder; it was evident that he, too, was helplessly intoxicated. Sick at heart, and with flaming cheeks, she rushed out of the room and back to the yard again, where, in as steady a voice as she could command, she ordered a post-chaise to be got ready forthwith, as she must immediately proceed home.

"But you'll not be leavin' Mr. Westacre behind, for sure?" said the head ostler, advancing with a grin.

"I think Mr. Westacre will find it more convenient to return to-morrow," she answered; "but I must set out at once."

The man scratched his head, and looked inquiringly at his companion. "Mr. Westacre haven't give no orders," he remarked; "he'll not be best pleased, mayhap, at me lettin' ye fly off same as that."

"I tell you I'll not wait another minute," said

Margery. "Where's the landlord? I'm not to be treated like this—I'm not to be insulted."

In her anger, and underlying terror, she raised her voice so that it could be heard all over the yard, and as she turned to enter the house in search of the host a man came quickly towards her from the open stable door.

"Miss Burchell! Margery! What are you doing here alone?—what has happened?"

"Oh, Mr. Frith," cried she, her voice trembling, and half-choked with tears, "God has sent you to help me! Oh, get me away, get me out of this! I want to go home—I—they won't attend to me! I want to have a chaise at once."

Edward went swiftly to the ostler, and after giving a few brief orders in a decided voice, returned to her side.

"There will be no further delay now," he said. "But are you really here, unprotected, at such an hour?"

"Unprotected indeed," said Margery, and even in the dim light he saw her lip quiver. "Ask me no questions, I beg of you; just help me."

"Well, I'll do that," he rejoined, drawing a long breath.

He was stepping away from her towards the stable, when she called him back. "Oh, don't leave me; I'm so frightened! They seem such rude folk here."

"I am only going to saddle my horse," he

returned; "I will ride beside you all the way home. So have no fear, no harm shall come to you."

She let him go then, and he went to the stable, leading forth his poor beast just as the horses were harnessed to the chaise. A chance word let drop by the stablemen had put him more or less in possession of the state of affairs, and his face was very gloomy as he helped Margery to enter the chaise.

Very slow and sad was their progress; slow, because, by Edward's orders, the post-boy forced his horses to accommodate their pace to that of his own broken-down steed; sad, because Margery cried all the way within the musty-smelling vehicle, while Edward, jogging along beside the window, felt his heart swell nigh to bursting within him. Yet to both the simple, single-minded pair—single-minded to narrowness — it appeared that there was no possible way of shaking off the chain which Margery had forged with her own hand.

CHAPTER XXI

"Though I cannot be said to be a flattering honest man, it must not be denied that I am a plain-dealing villain."

A FEW days later Harry Westacre stood in the inn-yard of the little market-town, idly waiting for the London coach to come in and discharge its customary load.

He was in a bad temper. The famous piece of brocade had been forwarded to him at the Red Dog, with a civil note from the draper informing him that Miss Burchell had paid for it though she had countermanded the silk gown. This sign of obstinacy irritated the young gentleman; and, moreover, her threat, or what he was pleased to call her threat, with regard to future financial arrangements, had impelled him to call upon Margery's lawyer, with a view to ascertaining his notions on the subject of settlements. The result had been far from satisfactory. Not only did he discover that good Miller Burchell had tied up everything that could by any possibility be tied up, but Margery's fortune proved smaller than he had anticipated. His views on the subject had been vague, and he had not realised that what constitutes

comfort, and even wealth, to members of a certain class of society, may appear insignificant when compared with the incomes enjoyed by those of a superior grade.

Mr. Lupton, the old attorney, who had from the first disapproved of the match, took a malicious pleasure in pointing out this fact to the young squire.

"Ye'll not be doin' so very well for yourself, Mr. Harry, when all's said and done," he cried, looking at the young man's chagrined countenance with twinkling eyes. "Nay, ye might have fetched a better figure if ye hadn't been in such a hurry to withdraw from the market."

Harry stared haughtily.

"I doubt there is but hundreds where you might very well fetch thousands," chuckled the old man. "Why didn't ye think o' lookin' out for your fancy article somewhere among tradesfolks, Mr. Harry? There's more brass going there. Some of these cotton-folk now—or a big drapery concern—there's a deal o' money in those quarters. But a miller's daughter, let her father have saved as tidy a sum as he will, she'll not bring you much—not what you looked for, I doubt. And all settled on herself, so that a young gentleman of spirit has to be beholden to her for every beggarly note! I doubt you've made a bad bargain, Mr. Harry."

"Damnation!" said Harry, and marched out of the room.

Now as he stood idling about the inn-yard he thought over these things with exceeding bitterness of spirit, and mentally cursed his own folly.

He might have done better—he certainly might have done better. One might pay too heavy a price even for the privilege of breaking the spirit of a pretty, saucy girl. What were a few hundreds a year since he could not touch one of them without her pleasure? Had he known before how the land lay he might have thrown her off; but now he had let other chances slip, he had spent all his available cash and entirely exhausted his credit. There were even writs out against him. He must better his fortunes at once if he would escape the sponging-house. No time now to hunt about for a draper's heiress. Curse that grinning old fool! How insolently he had spoken! And trebly accursed be his own hot-headed folly which had bade him leap before he looked.

Now, with a great clatter and bustle, the coach drew up; ostlers rushed forward; the smoking horses were unharnessed, coachman and guard made their way round to the tap-room. Many wrapped-up passengers also descended, each in turn being scrutinised by Harry, more from dull curiosity than from any hope of being able to identify them. He was in truth idling away an hour before trudging back to the hated dulness of the village.

All at once, from the interior of the vehicle, a cracked voice vociferated his name.

"Mr. Westacre! Mr. Harry! Well met, upon my soul!"

The peaked face of a little elderly gentleman was peering out of the window, while his thickly gloved hand fumbled with the door-handle.

"Hawkins!" exclaimed Harry. "Upon my life it rains lawyers to-day."

"My dear sir, my dear sir—you are the very man I want to see—if I could but open the door!"

Harry, with his thumbs thrust into his waistcoat pockets, languidly watched his efforts without making any attempt to come to his relief, until the little man, glancing at him, beckoned mysteriously.

"For God's sake, Mr. Harry, let me out! 'Tis the greatest chance that brings you here. I have news! Very sad news! Of deep concern to yourself as well as your honoured father!"

"Whew!" whistled Harry, plucking open the door in a moment. "What's the matter? Is my brother dead?"

He had propounded the question jestingly, but his face changed when the lawyer nodded once, and twice.

"Killed, Mr. Harry! 'Twas the most unfortunate affair—a pugilistic bout, I understand. Oh, no doubt"—in a cringing tone—"pugilism is all the rage, and young gentlemen of quality are, so to speak, bound to follow the fashion. Your brother,

Mr. Harry, was a handsome, gallant youth as ever was, and far be it from me to asperse his memory; but in this instance—more's the pity—his spirits carried him too far——"

"Oh, for Heaven's sake stop moralising, Hawkins!" interrupted Harry impatiently. "All that it concerns me to know is whether they carried him far enough. Did they carry him to the next world, you old magpie? Let there be some sense in your chattering, if chatter you must."

He had drawn the old man aside, and gripped him by the arm savagely; his face was livid, and yet spotted here and there with colour; his whole appearance betrayed violent excitement.

"Lord, Mr. Harry, sir! give me time to breathe, I beg. I am telling you as plain as I can speak. I can indeed understand how much you are upset by this sad news. Too true, Mr. Harry, too true, sir, your gallant brother is no more."

Harry's face lit up with a triumph which shocked old Mr. Hawkins, well-accustomed though he was in the course of his profession to light upon evil traits in his clients. Still Harry's open joy at so melancholy an event really scandalised him.

"Ah, my dear sir, my dear sir," he muttered, composing his face to a becoming expression of chastened satisfaction, since he saw such was expected of him, "thus wags the world. One man's misfortune is another's—what shall I say?—opportunity. Your lamented brother is indeed no

more, but your honoured father is not childless, and will doubtless find in you a stay and comfort for his declining years."

"Oh yes," said Harry, with a sardonic grin, "the old boy will find me all that, no doubt; but tell me about the affair, Hawkins. Details, man, details! How did it happen? When did you hear the news?"

"Why, at dusk last evening I was startled by an outcry at my office-door, and Jacques, your brother's valet, came rushing in. I had some difficulty in comprehending his jargon at first, for the fellow was in such a taking he could scarce remember his broken English; but at last he recovered himself enough to tell me that your poor brother—ah, these young men! these young men!—well, Mr. Harry, be not so impatient—I proceed. For a wager, I say, your lamented brother agreed to fight a professional pugilist, known, I believe, as the Little Bull of Brighton. The encounter took place somewhere in that neighbourhood. You know his Royal Highness, the Prince of Wales, has a liking for such entertainments, and, though they are practically illegal, the authorities in consequence wink at them.—Well, well, Mr. Harry, I continue my tale,—pray let go my arm, sir. You really hurt me.—Your lamented brother—a heavy weight, I understand, as the technical term goes—was no match, it seems, for the Little Bull; in fact he——"

"Was knocked out of time, I suppose?" interrupted Westacre.

"Was killed dead, Mr. Harry. The man told me so most distinctly. 'Are you sure there is no mistake?' I inquired—'No meestake, sir,' he replied in his queer foreign way. 'He dead! He a corpse! I see him lie there without life. These gentlemen carry him away in haste, and his head fall back, and his arms drop and he no breathe! He dead for sure——'"

"Carry him away; what did they do that for?" cried Harry.

"Why, as I have told you, my dear young friend, such encounters as these are illegal, and though the authorities display no great activity in preventing them, they make raids from time to time, and at the very critical moment of your brother's demise the police arrived upon the scene. The affair having ended fatally, all concerned in it were liable to serious pains and penalties. There was therefore a general stampede, and your brother's friends carried away his dead body. After I had rewarded Jacques for his forethought in coming to me with the sad tidings, I started off at once, being fortunate enough to catch the night-mail. I would not for worlds that your respected father should first hear of this sad event through the newspapers. It will go nigh to kill him, I fear me, but he will no doubt acquiesce in the decrees of Providence; and in you, Mr. Harry, he will find a support and a comforter."

"I'll go with you," cried Harry eagerly. "I'll go to my father. You post from here, I presume?"

"Y-yes, Mr. Harry," stammered the lawyer doubtfully. "I mean but to partake of some refreshment, and then proceed on my journey at once. But would it not be well to wait until to-morrow, Mr. Harry, before paying your respects to your bereaved parent? I—I understand from him that you and he have not been—on quite the most agreeable terms of late."

"Pooh!" cried Harry, with a loud, excited laugh, "times are changed now. I am his heir—the heir to Leith! Leith is entailed property, as you know. Every stiver he has must come to me whether he like it or no. By George!" he cried, slapping his thigh suddenly, "this affair comes only in the nick of time. Had good old John delayed his departure another month I had been done for."

Mr. Hawkins stared at him uncomprehendingly, drawing up the collar of his coat the while. They had been standing all this time in a corner of the yard, and the piercing November blast had been sporting round his wizened little person.

"I think, Mr. Harry," he faltered, "if you have no objection I will now go indoors and order some refreshment before setting forth again."

"Do, Hawkins, do!" agreed Harry, clapping him on the back. "Order it for two, old buck; I'll do you the honour of dining with you. Let's have a private room so that we may talk at ease,

and a bottle of their best port, man. I have a little business to attend to, but will be with you by the time dinner is ready."

"Certainly, Mr. Harry, certainly," cried Mr. Hawkins, with anguish depicted on every line of his face. "I am flattered and proud, but—ahem!—would it be well, think you, to delay so long? It is of the utmost importance that the tidings should be broken with delicacy and consideration to the unfortunate Squire. I dread his becoming acquainted with them without due preparation. If some courier were to arrive from London—if a chance rumour——?"

"Oh, fiddlesticks, you old croaker!" cried Harry roughly. "Go and order dinner."

"He! he! the same spirit as ever, I see, Mr. Harry. Dear, dear!—well, it enables you to hold up under these trying circumstances, and it is certainly at all times the gift of Heaven. I will order dinner, my dear young friend, and for the rest, we must trust in Providence."

Harry had already left him, and was striding away over the ill-paved streets, hugging himself at the thought of his unexpected good fortune. Almost incredible it would seem to him, even now, had it not been for the lawyer's attitude towards him—the obsequiousness of the family man of business to his patron's heir.

"Times are changed indeed," thought Harry gleefully. "How the old devil used to bully me

when I tried to wring a beggarly handful of sovereigns from him; how he used to prate and preach about my follies and extravagance. I'll bully him now, faith! I'll grind him well. Heir to Leith! Heir to Leith! And to think I had almost wed the miller's daughter!"

He had by this time reached the house of Margery's lawyer, and burst in upon the old man with an impetuosity that took him by surprise, and indeed caused him much displeasure.

"Hullo, sir!" he cried, looking up indignantly, as the young man strode across the room, hat on head, dress disordered, his whole personality betraying extraordinary excitement,—"hullo, sir! whatever's to do? 'Twasn't considered manners in my time to come bouncing in upon a body like this. Where's your hat, sir?"

"On my head," returned the other, "and there it shall stay. How dare you sit still when a man of my quality calls upon you? Come, up on your legs, sirrah! I've something of importance to tell you!"

"You've been drinking, Mr. Harry," said the attorney, leaning back in his chair and eyeing him sharply.

"Drinking? Not a drop, by George! but I daresay I'm a bit intoxicated. I've heard a piece of news—*news*, you old stick-in-the-mud; I vow you'll change your tone when you've heard it. The world is changed for me since I was here just now. My brother's dead, and I'm heir to Leith. Heir to

Leith—d'ye hear that? 'Gad, when I think how near I was to making a fool of myself! As you said, I was in an ace of making a very bad bargain, though I didn't know how bad. By George, it was a narrow shave!"

"I suppose you've come to tell me that the bargain's off?" said Mr. Lupton quietly.

"Off! I should think it was. The heir to Leith is more likely to marry a duke's daughter than a miller's. I was a fool to have ever thought of it—there were but two lives between me and the property after all; and now there is but one. The bargain's off indeed—you'd best tell her so—and the sooner the better!"

"Do your dirty work yourself, Mr. Harry," cried the attorney, jumping up with an agility that took the other by surprise. "If ever there was a case of good riddance to bad rubbish, this is one; but I doubt the lass will scarce be wise enough to think so. She is only a child. Had she a grain of sense she would never have thought of you for a moment. You'd best go and tell her yourself that you are jilting her who took you in your poverty, because you may now look for wealth."

"I protest I'll do no such thing," returned Harry haughtily; "if you don't choose to tell her, she may find out for herself. You are an impudent old rascal, and I'll pay you off some day!"

"Meanwhile," said the other, throwing open the door, "I'd be vastly obleeged to you, sir, if you'd

take *yourself* off. I've had to do with many a young scoundrel in my day, but 'pon my life I never met your match. I can't breathe in the room with you."

"You shall pay for your insolence, sir!" cried Harry vengefully, as he stepped past him.

The old man laughed derisively in response to these words; but after Harry's departure he stood cogitating with a melancholy face enough.

"The lass 'ull feel it, I doubt," he said. "Any lass would. Jilted—all in a minute—tossed away like an old shoe! That young scamp must have a heart like a flint—she is well out of him—well out of him. Yet she can't but feel it. She is not one to say much, but she must have lost her heart or she wouldn't have chosen him. 'Twouldn't be fair to let her hear the thing by chance—I'll go to her. Yes, 'twill be safest to go to her. I'll have a bit of dinner, then I'll be off."

CHAPTER XXII

"What is the meaning of thy thought,
O maiden fair and young?
There is such pleasure in thine eyes,
Such music on thy tongue.
There is a glory in thy face—
What can the meaning be?
'I love my love because I know
My love loves me!'"

"A PENNY for your thoughts, friend? They should be merry ones."

Thus Dr. May, jogging cautiously homewards in the dusk, to Attorney Lupton, sitting meditatively in his gig, while his horse, left to its own devices, crawled at a snail's pace in an opposite direction.

"Why, doctor, is it you?" cried the lawyer. "I have been at my old tricks, I suppose, chuckling out loud at my thoughts."

"Yes, faith, when I heard the sound I knew it must be you. Says I to myself, when I saw you creeping along under the hedge, 'Hullo,' says I, 'this fellow doesn't seem to be in a hurry whoever he may be. And yet the wind blows cold enough to freeze the marrow in one's bones, and the hour grows late. Time for honest men to be sitting snug by their own hearths.' And then I hear you laugh-

ing at your own private joke, and says I, 'Well, there's one honest man abroad as how it is. Here's my old crony Lupton,' says I."

Leaning down from his saddle, he grasped the other's extended palm warmly. Birds of a feather, indeed, were these two bluff old north-country men. Alike shrewd and rough of speech, straightforward of purpose, warm of heart.

"Pray what were you laughing at, if one may ask?" continued the doctor, straightening himself and admonishing his horse, restless of the delay, by an innocuous tap of the whip.

"Why, I was thinking how strangely the world wags nowadays. When a bonny lass lost her sweetheart in my times she piped her eye, as the saying goes, or at least went sorrowful for a day or two; but now, my word! she skips and dances and claps her hands. And yet 'tis not a heartless wench!"

"I'll wager you're talking of Margery o' the Mill," cried the doctor. "Don't tell me that young jackanapes, Harry Westacre, has drowned himself, or some such thing; for I vow he was born to be hanged."

"Tush, doctor, that's going too far!" But even in the dusk Dr. May could see his friend grin. "The young gentleman is not drowned yet, certainly, though I wouldn't foretell such an ultimate fate for him as you do. He's uncommonly well and hearty just at present, and a stroke of great good luck has

just befallen him—so he seems to think. 'Tis his brother who is dead."

"Nay, I'm sorry to hear that," returned the doctor. "A fine lad, poor John. A bit harum-scarum, but good-natured, and with a heart in his breast, which is more than his brother can boast of."

"So you'd say if you had seen him just now," returned Lupton. "'Cock-a-doodle-do! My brother's dead,' says he, and 'I'm heir to Leith!'—His eyes fair jumping out of his head! He came to tell me, of course, the match was off between him and Burchell's wench. 'I'll do better than that now,' says he; 'you'd best tell her so.' 'Nay, tell her yourself,' says I. 'I'll not do your dirty work.'"

"Yet ye did go to the mill," put in the doctor, as the other paused for breath.

"Ay, I did, because the rascal said he'd not be bothered to do it, and the girl might find out for herself; so, thinks I, 'Well, after all I'd best break it to her.' I thought she'd be undone about it, ye know!"

"And am I to understand that Margery skipped and danced at the news?"

"Faith, she jumped a yard from the floor, and clapped her hands, and sang, and danced round the table!"

"Well done, Margery!" cried Dr. May, laughing in his turn.

"My word, I never was so taken to in my life. There I've been spending an hour in making up

soft speeches to comfort her, and turning over in my mind all that could be put forward to help her to bear the blow, and she fair prances. 'I'm free!' says she, 'I'm free!' 'Free enough, lass,' says I, 'and why you were ever bound is more than I can tell. The match was of your own making; you wouldn't be said by anyone, if ye mind.' 'I know all that very well,' says she, quieting down all at once and going very red, and dropping her eyes so pretty and demure, you'd swear there was never so much as a caper in her. 'Well, what's the reason of it, my dear?' said I. 'I think I was mad,' said she, 'but I've come to my senses now.' 'A body wouldn't have thought that to look at you a minute ago,' said I. 'But as far as that goes I'm of your mind, my wench. If I wasn't so old and so fat I doubt I'd dance a bit myself—if only for your honest father's sake,' said I. For good Miller John was one of the best friends I had, you know, doctor."

"A worthy fellow indeed," said the doctor, who apparently saw nothing incongruous in the nature of the tribute which Attorney Lupton was prevented by age and obesity alone from paying to his friend's memory. "As for me, I never was so pleased at anything in my life. The lass never hoodwinked me. I knew she never cared a button for that young scoundrel!"

"But why did she agree to marry him then?" cried the lawyer, puzzled.

"Pooh! Who can account for a lass's whimsies?

Well, James, I don't know how you fancy this wind, but I think it's a bit fresh to potter about in. If I were you I'd hurry up that old beast of yours, and have my laugh out snugly in the inglenook."

"Capital advice—I reckon I'll follow it. Good-night, doctor."

"Good-night," called the doctor cheerily over his shoulder, for his horse was by this time advancing at a brisk trot. But a woeful disappointment awaited that trusty animal. For instead of turning his nose homewards, at the end of the lane, lo! he was whipped sharply round to the left and urged onwards in the direction of Burchell's Mill.

The parlour window was unshuttered, and as the doctor approached he could see the cheerful flicker of firelight on the pane. There seemed to be no other light in the room.

Leaning forward in his saddle, he tapped at the window with his hunting-crop, and immediately heard steps crossing the room. A moment later Margery's face peered out into the dusk.

"I want a little talk with you, my lass," said the doctor cautiously. "Come and let me in quietly, and don't call grandma. Two's company and three's none. What I've got to say is very particular."

Margery disappeared from the window, and presently opened the door. He could not see her face, but the sound of her voice was jubilant.

"I fancy I know what you've come to say, doctor," quoth she.

"You may or you may not," returned he oracularly. "Is the stable open, child? 'Tis too cold to leave Jerry standing outside. I'll tie him up and will be with you in a minute. Don't call granny whatever you do."

"Granny is busy in the kitchen," returned Margery. "But really, doctor——"

"Really and really, my dear, I want to have you to myself."

She waited for him in the doorway, shivering a little, partly with excitement and partly with cold; and after a moment or two her old friend joined her, walking cautiously, and raising his finger to his lips every time she attempted to speak. As he closed the parlour door she approached the hearth, drawing the logs together, so that they sent up a bright blaze.

"I have been keeping blind man's holiday here," said she, "and if I were to fetch a light now grandma would perhaps question me."

"To be sure," returned Dr May; "this is a vast deal cosier."

"I ought to have a tinder-box in this room," she went on, postponing, from some unaccountable sense of shyness, the coming colloquy. "My dear father's old box always used to lie here beside the clock, but that stupid Rob took it out one day and lost it."

"Why, my lass," cried the doctor, "if a candle were needed you'd have but to thrust a wisp of paper

between the bars, since you've got a fire. But the firelight is pleasanter!"

"True, I had forgotten that," said she.

"And so Rob lost your father's tinder-box?" inquired Dr. May, struck by a sudden thought. "Was it a brass one, with a motto on the cover: 'Light come, light go'?"

"The very thing," cried she eagerly. "Oh, doctor, have you seen it anywhere?"

"I have some dim notion that I have," replied he. "But I've not come to talk of tinder-boxes. I came to see if you were breaking your heart, Margery?"

Margery laughed merrily.

"I'll wager you met Mr. Lupton," cried she. "He will have told you that though my sweetheart has jilted me I continue to bear up."

"Well, my dear," returned he gravely, "if you are not breaking your heart, I know someone who is —someone who is breaking his heart for love of you."

Margery, who had been kneeling by the hearth, turned slowly round, her eyes dilated, her lips parted.

"Have you never guessed, my lass, that Edward Frith is fair mad for love of you?"

"Oh, sir, I—I——" she faltered, and then continued in an altered voice,—"I can scarce believe it."

"My dear, I'll swear it if you like," returned he. "I'll swear it by the grave of the woman I loved— and the Lord knows I hold nothing more sacred

than that. These were his very words, spoken nigh upon a year ago now."

He had caught down Margery's hands and held them fast, and she listened with the loveliest wave of colour sweeping over her face.

"'God knows,' said Edward, 'I wouldn't vex her' —that's you—'by so much as a word, for anything in the world. God knows how hard it is for me to hold myself in check. I love her better than my life!' That's what he said, Margery, my dear!"

"Then why—why——?" faltered Margery.

"Wait a bit," said the doctor. "'Tis the very thing I said to him. 'Why,' said I, 'don't you speak out your mind like a man?' Says he, 'I think it would be a dastardly thing. What,' says he, 'I am a beggar, my house is tumbling about my ears and my lands are lying waste——'"

"As if that mattered," she broke out involuntarily.

"Precisely," cried the old man delightedly, and he pumped Margery's hands vigorously up and down. "The very thing I knew you'd say. God bless you for a warm-hearted, generous lass—I knew you'd say so. That's why I came to you myself. The fellow would never speak out, my dear. He thinks it would be taking advantage of you."

"But what—what can I do, doctor?" said the poor child, with tears starting to her eyes. "I can't speak!"

"No, but I can," returned the other, with infinite satisfaction. "'Gad, I'm rather an elderly Mercury, but I reckon I can carry Cupid's errands as well as another. Did Mercury carry Cupid's errands? I'm sure I don't know, and probably you never learnt, but I'm a faithful messenger, that's what I mean; and I'll toddle back to Edward this very minute and tell him——"

"Oh, wait, wait," interrupted the girl tremulously. "What will you tell him, doctor? Don't say too much."

"You trust me, my love," returned Dr. May, drawing himself up. "I've come to years of discretion, I hope. I'll tell him nothing at all except that as he was too great a fool to speak for himself, I took the liberty of speaking for him, and that he'd best go and get his answer as soon as may be."

He felt Margery's hands flutter in his, and she turned away her head, but not before he had caught sight of two big tears standing on her eyelashes.

"Come, come, come! What's this, my love? What have I said to hurt thee, eh?"

He drew out his big silk handkerchief and began very gently to dry her eyes. She laughed, but faintly.

"'Tis nothing," said she. "I only thought—— Oh, doctor, he *might* have come himself!"

"Never you mind," returned the old man. "He'll come fast enough now, I'll wager; and he'll have

plenty to say. 'Tisn't the love that's wanting—'tis the queer, crooked notion that sticks in his noddle that's doing the mischief. He reckons it would be a mean thing to take advantage of your loneliness when he's nothing to offer you in return."

"Haven't I enough for two?" said Margery. And then she twisted her hands out of his, and clapped them to her face, and added quickly, "Oh, doctor, I didn't mean to say that—you won't tell him I said that? It wouldn't be fair. He would think me too forward."

"Indeed he wouldn't, my lass," returned Dr. May. "He would think you nothing but what you are, a prize and a treasure."

Here he was so carried away by his feelings that he was constrained to take her face in both his hands and kiss it tenderly. "But I'll not tell him for all that," he added gravely. "No, no; he must do his courting for himself."

CHAPTER XXIII

". . . In her bosom I'll unclasp my heart,
And take her hearing prisoner with the force
And strong encounter of my amorous tale."

YET another jaunt did poor faithful Jerry have that night; all the way through the village and across the bleak moor.

"Am I not an old fool?" laughed the doctor to himself, when a particularly sharp blast came sweeping over the dried heather, circling viciously round his bent head and nipping face and hands savagely. "Come along, Jerry, my boy. Faith! if I'm Mercury you must be Pegasus—let's use our wings, my lad, and fly on Love's errand. Margery will be caught on the hop as it were—Edward, for all his fantastical notions, will have to catch her. Ods-bobs! he's in for it now—he shall be happy in spite of himself!"

Such a loud rap as that by which the doctor announced his coming had not fallen on the crazy door for many a day. Old Molly was afraid to open, and Frith himself answered the summons.

"Dr. May!" cried he, starting back. "Is there anything the matter?"

"The matter is," said Dr. May, "that I'm starved

with cold, and clemmed as well; that I've ridden a matter of six mile at the end of my round to have a crack with you, Edward Frith. In common decency you'll give my horse a feed and me a bit of supper?"

"With all my heart, sir!" cried Edward warmly. "There's a good fire in the kitchen, if you don't mind stepping in there—we'll send Molly to bed after she's fried you some eggs and bacon. I'll warm you a pot of ale myself. 'Tis all I can offer you, but I daresay you'll make shift with it."

"'Twill do right enough!" cried the doctor, alighting stiffly, and throwing the reins to the other. "I'll go and make the old woman bestir herself, while you see to poor Jerry. I don't stand on ceremony with you, you see."

"'Twould be a queer thing if you did," answered Edward, as he led away the horse.

The doctor was already seated at the table, and attacking a somewhat stale loaf, when his host returned. The bacon and eggs were hissing in the pan, and old Molly was hobbling about with unusual activity. Edward now proceeded to mull a quart of ale, but little conversation passed between the two men until Dr. May's wants had been attended to, and the old woman had been dismissed.

Even then the doctor munched in silence for a moment or two, while Edward, seated opposite to him, watched him narrowly, conscious of an overwhelming and unaccountable excitement.

"Now, lad," said the doctor, pushing away his plate and leaning back in his chair, "I've two or three bits of news for you."

"Have you indeed, sir," replied Edward, in a somewhat disappointed tone.

One bit of news might have concerned him—so many surely could not in any way affect him—or her he loved.

"First of all," said Dr. May,—and stretching out his hand he snuffed the candles leisurely,—"first of all, and this is a thing I'm sorry for, Squire Westacre has just lost his eldest son."

"That is a pity indeed," interpolated Frith.

"As you say, a great pity, because the next heir is that empty-headed popinjay, Mr. Harry Westacre!"

Edward involuntarily clenched his hands, but said nothing.

"If the marriage agreed on between Mr. Harry Westacre and Margery Burchell were to take place," continued Dr. May, "our Margery would one day be lady of Leith. What think you of that?"

"I think," returned Frith in a low voice, "any man, be he high or low, too much honoured who should wed her."

"Well, the present heir of Leith is apparently not of your opinion. He has jilted her."

"Jilted her! The scoundrel!" cried Edward, starting to his feet.

"Compose yourself, my friend," said the doctor, "and hear me out. When these disastrous tidings

were broken to the young woman she was not by any means overcome by them. In fact I hear on reliable authority that she danced and sang. 'I am free,' says she, 'I am free!' I am informed these were her words!"

Edward dropped into his chair again, leaning his head against his hand so that his face was shaded.

"I, for one, was not surprised," said the elder man slowly. "I knew all along how little she cared for Harry Westacre. If you remember, I told you so more than once."

"You did," said the other, "and I did not believe you at first, but later on—I—— Well, thank God she has done with him!"

"Thank God indeed!" said Dr. May emphatically. "What think you of my news, Edward?"

"I am glad, sir, very glad that she has done with that unworthy fellow."

"Disinterestedly glad—eh?"

There was silence. The doctor took a long pull at his ale, and peered cautiously at the young man over the rim of the flagon.

"I've another bit of news for you," he remarked, after wiping his lips. "Margery o' the Mill is not a girl who will remain long on the stocks, so to speak. She has received another proposal of marriage to-night."

Edward leaned across the table; his face was very pale and his lips quivered as he asked—

"Who is the man?"

"A man you know very well—better than anyone in the world, in fact!"

"Doctor, don't torture me. You—you know how it is with me!"

"Exactly—so I told Margery. There, I won't keep you on the rack any longer. The offer she received to-night was from—Edward Frith."

"Doctor, how dare you!" cried Edward, almost choking with wrath. "How dare you mock me on a subject so sacred?"

"Don't be a fool, lad; sit down and I'll tell you all about it. I have no intention of mocking you. I told you the plain truth; an offer of marriage has been made to Margery Burchell this night in the name of Edward Frith—it is the plain truth I say, and I ought to know, because I made the offer myself."

"You!" cried Edward, with starting eyes.

"Yes! I—I—I! I told her that you loved her to distraction, but that you would never say so because you thought it would be dishonourable. Oh, I quoted your scruples word for word—about your being a beggar, and the tumble-down house, and all the rest of it—and she said——"

"What did she say?" gasped Edward; his strong frame was trembling, he could hardly articulate the words.

"She said, 'What does it matter!'" returned the doctor; and, rising, he clapped the young man on the back. "She flushed like the prettiest rose that

ever bloomed in June, and she looked fairly beside herself with joy, and she said, 'What does it matter!' and after a bit, 'But why didn't he tell me so himself?' In fact, my dear lad, as I knew all along, and told you to your face, she loves you. So now away with your fantastical notions. Have done with them for ever. Talk of honour! You'll be the most dishonourable scoundrel that ever walked the earth if you don't follow up what I said."

"Indeed and indeed——" broke out Edward; and here his feelings were too many for him, and he shook the doctor's hand, unable for the moment to speak. "How can I ever thank you?" he said brokenly at last.

"By having done with megrims," said Dr. May. "Faith, lad, 'tis a treat to see you look happy for once in your life!"

"Happy!" ejaculated Edward; and once more he was constrained to wring the doctor's hand for lack of words. "Oh, doctor, was that what she said?—'What does it matter!' And I doubting her.—Ah, Sweet!"

"Go and tell her that, my dear fellow," said Dr. May. "Ring the changes on the tune—she'll like it well enough. No use practising on me. I have forgotten the variations. Jerry and I will betake ourselves to the road again. Poor ill-used beast, he'll think the world is going topsy-turvy!"

Before dawn on the following morning, Edward came swinging over the moor to seek his love.

Lightfoot's slow pace did not suit his ardour; he felt somehow as if his own personal exertions would bring him nearer to Margery. It seemed to him that his feet scarcely touched the frost-bound waste as his long strides carried him over it.

It was a white frost; the world looked ghostly enough when he set forth, but just as he was about to turn off from the moor to the downward path leading to the village and to the mill, the sun rose in a glory of pink and gold, and sent long rays streaming over the silvery plain, turning it into a fairyland. A robin was piping somewhere on the jewelled branches of the lime-tree which overshadowed Margery's dairy; the rime outlined, as with diamonds, the lintel of her door, the leading of her window, the edge of every tile upon her roof. A fit palace in which to pay court to his queen!

He tapped at the door, and she opened to him, hanging out a rosy flag in welcome.

"I have come for my answer," he said; and then, almost before he knew what he was doing, he had taken her in his arms.

"But you have not asked your question yet," said she archly, after a moment.

"Darling!" returned Edward.

"I don't even know how much you like me," she went on.

"Oh, what a tale!"

"At least you might tell me so," persisted she, with a pout.

He grew serious all at once in the midst of his delirious joy, and enfolded her more closely in his arms as he answered—

"My dear, sometimes a man's heart is so full that he can't speak out, and that's the way with me. But I think you know how much I love you."

"I do indeed," she returned, serious in her turn; "but I am much afraid 'twas I loved you first."

"That couldn't be," cried he, "for I loved you from the very first moment I saw you."

"What! when grandma and I came to visit you?"

"No; before that. When I saw you unharnessing your horse; or even before that. When I looked out of the window and saw a bit of your face under your big hat—just the end of your chin and your ear—I fell in love with that bit first."

Edward, Edward! What manner of talk was this to come from your sage lips? But even the veriest wiseacre must talk sweet follies when he is in love. Margery, at least, found no fault with these speeches; and many such passed between them until, at the entrance of Jenny with a foaming pail, they started apart.

CHAPTER XXIV

"Thou wear a lion's hide! doff it for shame
And hang a calf's skin on those recreant limbs."

IT was quite dark when the post-chaise containing a very nervous Lawyer Hawkins, and a somewhat boisterous Harry Westacre, drove up before the stone portico of Leith Hall. The great pile looked lifeless enough, with its closed shutters and fast-barred doors; but Harry, alighting first, pulled at the bell so violently that it sent a peal jangling through the house loud enough to wake the dead.

"My dear Mr. Harry, pray, pray be cautious!" urged Hawkins, almost prayerfully, as he mounted the steps and stood beside him. "Remember your honoured father has as yet no idea of the sad event which brings us here."

His teeth were chattering, partly with terror, partly on account of the extreme cold.

"Caution be damned!" said Harry.

He was raising his hand to the bell again, when steps were heard crossing the hall within, and after much creaking of bolts and rattling of chains the door was thrown open, revealing the forms of Simmons,

the butler, and a couple of agitated footmen standing coatless in the rear.

The light from within fell upon the scared countenance of Mr. Hawkins, who greeted the head functionary in an apologetic tone.

"I am most grieved, my dear Mr. Simmons, to have disturbed you at this time of night, but I am forced to see your master on very important business—very melancholy and important business."

"I couldn't think whatever was the matter! Folks comin' so late and pullin' at the bell that loud—'tis what I've never been used to in a gentleman's house. But there's news—there's bad news, is there, sir?" said Simmons anxiously. "Step in, do, Mr. Hawkins."

As he advanced to the doorstep he caught sight of Harry, and started back.

"Mr. Harry! You here? I might have known 'twas you by the way you pulled the bell. We—the lads thought 'twas thieves. I'm very sorry, Mr. Harry," he went on in a tone of genuine concern, "but my orders is strict. Squire forbade me to let you cross the door, sir!"

"Stand back, you old fool!" cried Harry angrily. "You don't know what you're talking about. My father daren't shut the door in my face now. My brother's dead and I'm the heir to Leith!"

The sound of a hoarse cry from within froze the butler's horrified rejoinder on his lips.

Supporting himself against one of the pillars in

the hall stood the figure of the old squire, looking almost gigantic in its long dressing-gown. His face was ashy white, his bloodshot eyes roamed from one to the other of the little group.

"It's a lie!" he gasped almost inarticulately; "it's a lie, I say. The fellow couldn't speak the truth to save his life!"

He gazed round at them, his lips quivering, his form swaying, the veins on the hand which clutched the pillar standing out like whipcord.

"I say 'tis a lie," he repeated piteously. "Simmons, you—you heard what the scoundrel said. It can't be true!"

"God grant it mayn't be true, sir," said Simmons, whose own lips were white. "Come into the library, sir—don't you stand here in the cold."

"You'll see if it isn't true," cried Harry, beside himself with fury at his reception. "Ask Hawkins. What's Hawkins here for at this time of night if it isn't true?"

The squire turned to Hawkins; his huge form seemed to shrink, his voice piped shrill like that of a very old man, as he cried, still with an ineffectual attempt at wrathful incredulity—

"Hawkins, how dare you come here so late? How dare you—bring such a tale?—What—what?"

He reeled, and would have fallen had not Simmons and one of the other men rushed to his assistance. They supported him into the library, whither

Hawkins, after many muttered lamentations, and a glance at Harry which was as reproachful as he dared to make, followed him.

After a moment's pause Harry turned sharply to the remaining footman, and desired him haughtily to take out Mr. Hawkins' valise and send the post-chaise away.

"What are you snivelling for, sirrah?" he asked, as the lad came back after having fulfilled his behests; for he had noted that Tom had wiped his eyes with the back of his hand as he mounted the steps.

"Please, sir," said the fellow, blubbering outright, "it's Mester John. Eh, dear, I'm fair broken-hearted to think on't. He wer'—he wer' al'ays good to me!"

Harry turned away with a muttered curse, and strode towards the great dining-room.

Here all was dark. The faces of the portraits on the walls glimmered faintly forth in the light from the hall; the long table was draped in white.

Harry shivered; to his excited fancy the room looked like a death-chamber.

"There is no fire here," he said complainingly.

"Please, Mester Harry," returned Tom, "maister generally uses the breakfast-parlour when he's alone; there's a nice fire there, sir."

"Fetch me a glass of brandy there, then," ordered Harry. "I vow the night is cold enough to freeze one to death. And, hark ye, tell the maids to get

my room ready. Tell 'em to light a roaring fire, and see that they warm the bed."

He stalked into the breakfast-parlour, and threw himself into his father's arm-chair.

The remnants of the squire's half-finished meal, interrupted by their arrival, were still upon the table; also a decanter of port. Harry drew it towards him, and filled himself a glass, although he had already partaken somewhat freely of the same beverage at the Royal George.

"Deuce take it! Everyone in the house might be dead!" he cried, glancing moodily round; the elation and excitement of a little time ago giving place to gathering resentment. Confound it! No one seemed to take any account of the fact that he was now heir to Leith. But they should smart for it, one and all.

"Please, sir," said Tom, beginning with his usual formula, "I can't get the brandy for you just yet. Mester Simmons have got the keys, and he and Robert is gettin' maister to bed. He says he can't attend to nothin' else just now."

Harry turned on him so savagely that the lad fled; and the young squire bestowed his attention on the port once more, until his moody meditations were interrupted by the arrival of the housekeeper.

A good-natured, ruddy, elderly female was this Mrs. Maynard, usually as smiling of countenance as she was portly of form; but she now entered with a

rush very unlike her usual stately tread, her cap disordered, and her face discomposed.

"Oh, Mester Harry!" she cried. "This news can't be true, for sure! It can't be true as our dear Mester John be cut off all in a moment, and him so young. Tom telled me the young master was killed. Oh, woe's the day! Eh, dear! Eh, dear, it can never be true, Mester Harry!"

"It's as true as I'm here," returned he, glowering at her with his bloodshot eyes. "I shouldn't be here if it wasn't true. But here I am now, and here I mean to stay, Mrs. Maynard. I'm the young squire now, and I'll be treated as such."

"Mercy on me!" ejaculated the housekeeper. "Dead, Mester Harry!"

And she actually so far forgot herself as to fling her black silk apron over her head.

Here was another who dared to think more of the death of the elder son than of the younger's succession.

Harry was almost beside himself.

"Out of this, you hag!" he cried, suddenly springing to his feet. "Take yourself and your lamentations elsewhere. Confusion! There is but one cry among the whole of ye—*He's dead, he's dead!*—and never a word for the living. But I'll not forget it; every soul of you shall live to rue it."

"Lord ha' mercy me!" ejaculated the poor

woman, dropping her apron, and gazing at him aghast. "But surely—your own dear brother, Mester Harry."

The implied reproach in her tone, added to Harry's sense of injury, so infuriated him that he made a blind rush towards her, and might in his semi-intoxicated state have actually struck her, had he not stumbled over a chair and measured his length upon the floor.

Before he had time to recover himself the old dame had made her escape; but within the hour every domestic in Leith Hall knew that not only was their beloved young squire dead, but that an arch tyrant had come to take his place.

CHAPTER XXV

"When I consider life, 'tis all a cheat;
Yet fool'd with hope, men favour the deceit,
Trust on, and think to-morrow will repay:
To-morrow's falser than the former day."

HARRY appeared at the breakfast-table on the following morning, sober indeed, but looking white and sodden after his excesses of the previous night. He greeted Mr. Hawkins, the only other occupant of the room, sullenly.

"Well?" he inquired.

"Well," returned the lawyer, rubbing his hands diffidently, "I hope you slept soundly, Mr. Harry. I passed an excellent night."

"Pshaw!" said Harry, "do you think I want to hear about that? Have you seen my father?"

"True, true; it was indeed inconsiderate of me not to endeavour to allay your natural anxiety. I have not yet seen the squire, Mr. Harry, but Simmons tells me he passed a very miserable and unquiet night, and is sadly dispirited this morning. He hopes, however,—Simmons, I mean,—that by keeping his master very quiet the seizure which at first appeared imminent may be averted."

Harry, who had been walking about with his hands in his pockets, sat down and began to chip an egg.

"I must own to sharing Simmons' fears last night," continued Hawkins. "At your father's age the news of such a calamity, so suddenly announced, might very well have proved too much for him. Not that I mean to reproach you, my dear sir! you were unaware of his presence, of course, and could not be expected to know how your words would affect him. I merely allude to the unhappy circumstance now, in order to impress on you that it would be as well—hem!—hem!"—here he coughed behind his hand—"for you to curb your impatience, and check your natural desire to console your afflicted parent. It would be well, in fact, that you should keep away from his room to-day."

Harry dropped his spoon, and turned round fiercely.

"I shall do exactly as I please about that," he returned. "I am not to be hectored and brow-beaten."

"Certainly not, certainly not," agreed the lawyer obsequiously. "Brow-beaten! Good gracious!—I merely ventured to offer you my respectful advice, Mr. Harry, because I thought in the long run it would be in your own interest."

Here he darted a sidelong glance at his young client. "The squire, I grieve to say, is much

incensed against you, not merely on account of certain youthful follies of yours—mere peccadilloes, I've no doubt—but on account of the heartless manner—these are his words, my dear sir, not mine, I beg you to believe—in which you announced the tidings of your brother's death. As your friend, my dear Mr. Harry, as your true friend, let me urge you to give the squire time to cool down. A little—hem!—assumption of fraternal affection and—some indication of natural grief, would, if I might suggest it, go far to soften his heart towards you."

The other looked up with a curl of the lip, but made no reply.

"You see," continued Mr. Hawkins insinuatingly, "to-day must be a very trying one for your unfortunate father, my dear Mr. Harry. We may expect at any moment a courier from London, making formal announcement of the sad event. There will be arrangements to make, moreover, about the—the funeral. The remains of your lamented brother will have to be conveyed down here for interment in the family vault, by your father's wish. He has already dispatched messengers to town with instructions to that effect."

Harry went on with his breakfast in a very ill humour. All this business irritated and annoyed him. The funeral would be a confounded bore; and his father's attitude towards himself enraged him.

"The tailor is coming from Liverpool to measure the squire for a black suit," continued the lawyer; "all the household is also to wear mourning."

"The tailor had better measure me too," interrupted Harry. "I say, Hawkins, there's one thing you've forgotten. I want money!"

"Oh yes?" responded the other faintly. "Indeed, Mr. Harry?"

"Yes, indeed," returned the young man firmly; "and you must give it me."

Mr. Hawkins looked alarmed, and feebly shook his head.

"I doubt if your honoured father would authorise me to do that," he said.

"I say you *shall* give it me!" cried Harry. "Confound you, Hawkins, don't you know I'm master now? I can raise as much money as ever I like by a stroke of the pen, and if I choose to ask you for it, it's an order. An order, do you hear? An order!"

He spoke so fiercely that the other turned a little pale, but after a brief pause of calculation he apparently came to the conclusion that it would be better to give in gracefully.

"Well, my dear young friend," he said, in as genial a tone as he could assume under such trying circumstances, "far be it from me to withstand you at such a moment as this. I have brought with me but a small amount of ready money—but if a twenty-pound note would be of service——"

"A twenty-pound note will do to begin with, I daresay," responded Harry, with a laugh, and he extended his hand carelessly.

Mr. Hawkins unfolded a serviceable-looking pocket-book, and extracted therefrom the note in question, which Harry pocketed with a nod of acknowledgment.

The meal concluded, the young man strolled towards the window and drew up the blind with a jerk; but Simmons, on entering with his subordinates to remove the breakfast things, immediately pulled it down again with a scandalised face.

"My master gave strict orders, sir, that the blinds was to be kept down till after the funeral."

The long, dreary day passed with incredible slowness; the tailor's visit being, in Harry's estimation, the one bright spot in the all-pervading darkness. He gave a variety of orders of so extensive a nature that that functionary was considerably startled, and knowing Mr. Harry well by reputation, thought it advisable before leaving the house to ascertain if these orders had his father's approval. A provincial tradesman could not afford to give unlimited credit, and though he might be secure of his money at the squire's death, the said squire was by no means a very old man.

It came to pass, therefore, that after that discreet personage had withdrawn for the second time from the master's darkened room, the heir of Leith was imperiously summoned to his father's presence.

The squire was up and dressed, but his unshaven face looked haggard, and years older than on the preceding night.

He looked up angrily as his son entered, a rush of colour overspreading his hitherto pale face.

"What is this, sir?" he cried. "You've been giving orders right and left, I hear. Bragging of standing in your brother's shoes before he's well-nigh cold—poor lad,"—here his voice shook. "I'll not have it, I say. You've got to know your place, sir. You're my son, worse luck! but you shan't be master —not while I'm living!"

"Who's to prevent me?" retorted Harry. He, too, had grown pale, and stood looking scornfully down at his father, as the old man leaned forward in his chair, his hands clenching the arms fiercely.

"Who is to prevent you? I will, by Heaven!"

Harry laughed ironically. "You'll find it hard work then," he said. "The place is entailed—every stick and stone must be mine. You may pull your purse-strings as tight as you like, I can raise money in spite of you. Ay, and as much as I please. I am heir in tail, and can make ducks and drakes of it when you go—ah, and before——"

The squire rose suddenly; he was a powerful man, and vigorous still in spite of his sixty odd years. Anger, no doubt, lent him additional strength. Almost before his son could realise it, he found himself bundled outside his father's door, which was double-locked behind him.

At dinner, as on the previous evening, Harry indulged freely in the excellent vintage provided by the Leith cellar. He had eaten nothing since morning, and perhaps on this account the generous liquor took more hold on him. His spirits rose as the meal progressed; he laughed and talked loudly, and even sang snatches of song, to the intense disgust of good old Simmons, who waited upon him with a funereal expression, and answered his questions in a scandalised whisper.

"Come, Hawkins, let's keep up our hearts!" cried Harry, as the cloth was withdrawn. "Open a fresh bottle, Simmons, and you shall drink my health. Success to the heir of Leith! Now, Hawkins, you shall take the lead—let's hear you propose the toast."

"It is well," said the lawyer, with an apprehensive glance at Simmons, "to remember the silver lining to the gloomy cloud. Your worshipful father has indeed lost a most excellent son, but there remains one to carry on the family honours, and to be a comfort to him in his declining years. The health of the heir of Leith, Mr. Harry!"

He raised his glass, and bowed over it to the young man.

"Drink it off!" cried the other, with a laugh. "Now, Simmons, here's a glass for you. You, too, shall drink the health of the heir of Leith."

But Simmons stepped back, putting his hands behind him.

"No, sir," he said; "no, Mr. Harry, it's what I couldn't do, not jest now, sir, while your brother lies unburied. I couldn't touch a drop, sir, it 'ud choke me!"

"You shall drink it when I tell you, fellow!" shouted Harry, "or, by George! 'twill be the worse for you!—I have a long memory, and the day will come——"

"A long memory but a short reign," cried a voice from the door. "If, by the heir of Leith, you mean yourself, my good Hal, I'll have a word or two to say about that."

The glass fell clattering to the ground, and Harry turned, with an ashy face and a dropping jaw, to behold his brother standing in the doorway.

CHAPTER XXVI

"Then my eyes
Pursued him down the street, and far away,
Among the honest shoulders of the crowd,
Read rascal in the motions of his back,
And scoundrel in the supple-sliding knee."

IN a few moments the whole house was in a joyous bustle and uproar. Mr. John had come back. The young squire was not dead, after all, but alive and hearty, with a broken head, and a swelled face, and a variety of green and yellow bruises adorning different portions of his person; but, as old Simmons said, with a laugh which was choked midway by a sob, there was nothing to hurt in all that—it was just part of the day's work, so to speak! Anybody but a fool of a Frenchy would know that an Englishman was not killed so easy.

The squire came staggering downstairs, and almost wrung off his son's hand; the tears were raining down his face—

"What! 'Tis you, John lad?—'Tis you, eh?"

"'Tis me," responded John. "Not much of an object to look at just now, but I reckon you'd rather have me with a swelled face than go on

thinking me dead. I could very near have murdered that fellow Jacques when I heard what a fright he gave you all. I thought I'd best come down and show myself, so that you could see for yourself there wasn't much amiss."

"Not much amiss, indeed!" cried the squire, with a wavering laugh, as he clapped his son on the back. "The ladies might think you no beauty just now, but I swear that puffed-up face of yours is the handsomest sight in the world to me. It was very well done of you, lad, to come down yourself. I daresay you'd have fancied lying quiet in bed a bit longer."

"Nay, I'm not much of a one for staying in bed, sir. A few bruises don't count, and I'll work the stiffness off with the harriers to-morrow. I'm not ashamed to be beat by the Little Bull—he's a bruiser, no mistake. Why, even Billy the Smasher can't stand up to him,—but I've not done with him yet, for all that."

"Right—right—that's the right spirit!" roared his father. "I don't know how I could have been such a fool as to give credit to the tale for a moment. I might have known that you were a bit too hard-headed to be killed by a bout or two of fisticuffs. But hearing the thing so sudden-like took me aback, I suppose—and Hawkins, there, was so positive. He announced your death as a certain thing. 'Failure of the heart, no doubt,' says he—and told such a pitiful tale of how you

was carried away with your head dangling, that, faith, I believed him."

"Ah, to be sure, Hawkins brought the news," returned John, and for a moment his honest, good-humoured face clouded over.

"No one, I assure you, my dear Mr. John, could so rejoice to find himself mistaken, as I do on this most auspicious occasion," twittered the lawyer.

He glanced so imploringly at the young squire that the latter, who had been on the point of animadverting on the fact of his having discovered him in the act of drinking his supposed successor's health, was mollified, and forbore.

"Oh yes, they carried me off—they were all scared of the police, d'ye see? I stayed with Jerry Wynne till the alarm blew over, and sent for Jacques. My word! the fellow's face was a study when he saw me! As soon as I heard his tale I posted off to set your mind at rest."

Meanwhile Harry had been standing apart, partially sobered by the shock, and raging in silence. Catching sight of him on a sudden, John stepped towards him, and tapped him good-humouredly on the shoulder.

"Never look so gloomy, man," he cried. "Hang me, you are like the skeleton at the feast! Put a better face on't, for the Lord's sake, Hal!—don't let my brother be the only one who is not glad that I am still alive!"

He spoke merrily, yet with an underlying note of real feeling; but Harry, stung by the jovial tone, the laugh, the confident air, in contrast to his own bitter sense of outlawry, struck at the proffered hand, and turned away, scowling.

Thereupon the squire, in whom joy at the home-coming of his first-born had hitherto left no room for other considerations, was recalled to a remembrance of Harry's affronts to himself, and callousness under what had threatened to be so serious a family calamity.

"Out of my house!" he cried. "You, who not only rejoiced at the news of your brother's death, but insulted your father in his hour of sorrow. Out of my house, I say! Begone for ever!—Nay, John, have done!"—as John would have interfered—"'Tis useless to speak for him. 'Tis useless, I say! Why, the fellow threatened me—threatened me to my face—to make ducks and drakes of the old place as soon as I was gone. 'I'm heir in tail,' says he. We'll see about that now, John, eh? You and me will make it our business to cut off the entail. I'd liefer trust everything to you, lad. You think kindly of your old father, even when you are not with him. You even made shift to bundle out of bed with your broken head and all, rather than leave me anxious; but this heartless scoundrel—scoundrel, I say, though he is my son!—what did he care even if the shock killed me? 'My brother's dead,' says he, 'and I'm heir to Leith!'—You and

me'll break the entail to-morrow, and settle the place absolutely on you."

As Harry stood glowering back at his father, forsaken even by his would-be advocate John, in whom the last recital had aroused a fierce indignation, the great bell, hung in the turret of the west wing, began to peal merrily, and a ruddy light shone from without on the as yet unshuttered windows.

"What's this?" cried the squire in an altered tone. "What's the bell ringing for, Simmons? The work-folk will think the house is afire."

"Well, no matter if they do," cried Simmons, who was beside himself with excitement; "better they should do that than go on thinking Mr. John's dead. They'll all come running up here, sir, and then we can tell them the good news, and show 'em Mr. John, wick and hearty,—and Tom and Robert is jest lighting a bonfire on the lawn."

"Right!" cried his master jovially. "Up with the blinds, Simmons! Every one in the house, split me! By George! I never want to see the blinds pulled down again!"

The squire and John rushed to the window, where Mr. Hawkins was already officiously pulling up the blind. In another moment the casement was thrown open, and the glare from without shone upon the walls. The sound of the crackling wood was soon lost in ringing cheers and joyful shouts.

At length the door was opened a very little way, the chain within being set across the aperture. Jenny's scared face appeared in the uncertain light of a flickering candle, which she held aloft.

"Let me in!" cried Harry. "It's I. I must see your mistress for a minute."

"Our missus knows it's yo', sir," said the girl. "She bid me put up the chain afore I opened the door, and she bid me say she were engaged."

"Engaged with Farmer Frith, I suppose," said Westacre. "I saw him in the window."

"Engaged *to* Farmer Frith," said a voice from within the house, and a square of ruddy light appearing in the passage denoted that the parlour door was thrown open.

"Let me in for one moment, Margery," pleaded Harry. "I want to speak to you. 'Tis all a mistake—my brother's alive."

"Indeed? I give you joy," came the laughing voice from within the parlour.

"So nothing need be changed," he continued eagerly. "Do let me in! I must explain to you how matters stand."

"No, thank you," rejoined the voice. "I understand quite well, and am perfectly satisfied. Good-night. Shut the door, Jenny."

As Jenny hesitated, there was a rustle of skirts in the passage and the door was clapped to.

"I'll put a spoke in your wheel, though, madam, if I die for it!" growled Harry as he turned away.

Withdrawing into the shadow of the hedge, he walked away cautiously, proceeding more rapidly when he had left the precincts of the mill behind.

He made straight for Rob's lodgings, and, entering summarily, found that worthy smoking and conning a week-old newspaper in the chimney-corner.

"Mester Harry!" cried Rob, starting to his feet.

"Hush, you fool! I've come for one word with you, and then I leave this place for good. I vow 'tis too hot to hold me now."

"What, isn't it true, then, that yo're heir to Leith Hall?"

"Devil a bit of it! 'Twas a trick of old Nick's, I do believe. My brother's alive and kicking, and my father has made up his mind to break the entail and cut me out altogether. As for Margery——"

"Eh, dear! Yes, we know about that," returned Rob, with a grin. "Yo' should ha' looked before yo' leaped, Mester Harry. She was on with the new love as soon as yo'r back was turned."

"Well, you great oaf, why didn't you prevent that?" cried Harry impatiently. "Don't you know it is you who ought to be in my shoes, not Edward Frith?"

"Me!" exclaimed the miller, amazed.

"Yes, you. Wasn't it to be either you or me—if not me then you? She said so herself."

"True, so she did!" cried the other, clapping his hand to his forehead. "'One or t'other,' says she—I mind it well."

"Well, then, keep her to her word," returned Harry. "'Tis her boast that her word is as good as her bond. All you've got to do is to claim her."

"But there'll be Edward Frith to reckon with," said Rob doubtfully.

"Pooh!" returned the other, "he's easy settled. The girl can't deny her promise. He'll have to stand back."

"Why, then, I will claim her," cried Rob.

"Do," said Harry, with a malevolent smile; "and when she's your wife, don't forget to put in practice what you preached to me. Break her in."

"Ah, I'll do that," agreed Rob, and his coarse face assumed an expression as sinister as Harry's own.

CHAPTER XXVII

"O, but man, proud man,
Drest in a little brief authority,
Most ignorant of what he's most assured,
His glassy essence—like an angry ape
Plays such fantastic tricks before high heaven
As make the angels weep."

"BY your leave," said Rob, thrusting in his head at the door of the parlour, just as Edward had installed himself on the settle next to Margery, and was preparing to spend a happy hour in her company.

"What do you want?" cried Margery, moving a little farther away from her lover.

"Why, I want a word or two wi' yo', if 'tis convenient; an' I want a word or two wi' *him*, yon," said Rob, pointing to Edward.

"It is not at all convenient," responded his mistress tartly. "What business have you to come to the house at this hour of the morning? You should be in the very midst of your work! You don't know your place, sir."

"Dunnot I?" said Rob; and he very deliberately walked into the room and closed the door behind him. "I reckon I do though, better nor yo' know

yo'rs, missus, haply; and a deal better nor he knows his;" and he jerked his thumb towards the young farmer.

"What is the meaning of this?" asked the latter sternly. "How dare you speak to Miss Burchell in such a tone? You forget yourself, Rob."

"Nay, I dunnot forget mysel'," retorted the miller, wagging his head portentously. "I've a very good memory, Mester Frith — a better memory nor missus has, seemin'ly. I've coom to remind her o' summat."

He crossed the room till he stood close to Margery, and then drawing a coin from his pocket tossed it in the air.

"D'ye mind onythin' o' that mak'?" he asked, leering at her.

Margery uttered a cry, and shrank close to Edward.

"How dare you, sir!" cried Edward warmly, "how dare you insult your mistress by reminding her of the plot which you and Mr. Westacre had the impudence to make against her? I regret now that I did not advise her to dismiss you at once. I did wrong, very wrong, in allowing her to keep you in her service after such an affront."

Rob laughed derisively. "Somebry's goin' to get the bag," he remarked jocularly, "but 'tis not me. Yo're altogether wrong, Mester Frith. I'm talkin' o' summat quite different—summat as missus theer calls to mind now as well as me."

Picking up the coin, he spun it in the air again.

"*Tails, Rob!*" he cried. "D'ye mind that, Missus Margery? 'If not the one the t'other,' says yo'. 'Tak' your chance,' says yo'—'It shall be you or him,' yo' says—'If one draws back I tak' the other.'"

Margery turned deadly pale, and catching hold of Edward's hand, clung to it with both hers.

"Oh, Edward!" she cried. "Oh, Edward, Edward!"

"She dursen't deny it," cried Rob triumphantly.

"Oh, 'tis true, 'tis true!" moaned the girl. "I can't deny it, Edward, I can't!"

"Well," resumed the miller jubilantly, "theer it is, a plain case. Mester Harry have drawed back, so here I coom. 'Tis my turn now. 'Tis Mester Frith as mun be sent packin'. I forbid the banns between Margery Burchell and Edward Frith. For why? Because Margery Burchell is promised to me, and I'm goin' to tak' her to wife."

"Oh, save me!" cried Margery wildly, throwing herself into Edward's arms. "Save me, Edward!"

He was quite as white as she, but calm and determined. Disengaging himself gently, he rose and stepped up to Rob.

"I can make nothing of this tale," he said, "and in any case I wouldn't take your word for it. I can't for a moment believe that you have any real claim upon Miss Burchell—and I won't have her frightened and upset. Leave the room at once. I

must talk the matter quietly over with her, and that can't be done while you are here. Begone, I say!"

"Who's to make me go?" thundered Rob. "By the Lord, I'm maister here. I'll have my rights, I will. I'm as good a mon as yo', Ed'ard Frith—if one or other of us mun go, it mun be yo'."

Almost before Margery knew what had happened, the two men were wrestling with each other, for Rob gripped Edward so suddenly that he was forced to defend himself. For a moment or two they swayed backwards and forwards, Rob's face flushed, and his eyes glaring; Edward still pale, and setting his teeth hard. They were well matched, and as they in wrestling moved the body only, keeping the feet firmly planted, they made but little noise over the contest.

Margery was watching with wide-open eyes, too much terrified even to scream, when the door opened suddenly and Dr. May came in.

"My word!" he cried, starting back in amazement. "Is this a game—a trial of strength? Are they in earnest, child?"

"Oh, indeed they are, sir!" cried Margery, running towards him. "For God's sake stop them!"

Hastening up to the combatants, the doctor struck Rob over the knuckles sharply with his riding-cane, and with a snarl he relaxed his hold. Edward also gave way, and the two men fell apart.

"Upon my word!" ejaculated Dr. May, "these

are pretty doings for peaceable folk in the early morning! What's wrong here, I say? Rob Rigby, what villainy have you afoot?"

Rob, who had been ruefully contemplating his knuckles, one or two of which had been cut open by the doctor's cane, now looked up sullenly.

"I were fightin' for my reets," he said; "I mean to have my reets. That theer lass promised to wed me if she didn't wed Harry Westacre—didn't yo', wench? Speak up."

"I was mad," faltered Margery.

"Mad or sane, yo' meant what yo' said," insisted the miller threateningly.

"I — I ——" she stammered, and burst into tears.

"Now look here, Rigby, we shall never hear the rights on't as long as you are here, I see," said Dr. May. "Take yourself off, my friend. Time enough to hear your tale after Miss Burchell has told hers. She won't run away, I promise you. You can keep a watch on the house, if you like, from the mill-chamber. But be off with you now. We shall be ready enough to inquire into your side of the question later on."

"Well, it can do me no harm to wait, as how 'tis," returned Rob, after hesitating for a moment. He was impressed, in spite of himself, by the doctor's resolute air. "The business 'ull not spoil for keepin'," he added. "Let the wench try all roads, she can't get out of it."

He slouched to the door, where he paused to say threateningly—

"This arternoon, though, I mun have things settled. I'll not be put off wi' no shilly-shally."

Nobody vouchsafed a response, and he closed the door with a bang.

"Now, Margery," said Edward, turning to the girl and speaking quietly, though with unconscious sternness, "let's hear the meaning of this story."

"I can't believe for a moment," interposed the doctor excitedly, "that you gave a promise of marriage to your own servant."

Margery dried her eyes, and looked from one to the other bravely.

"I'll tell you the truth," she said; "you must think what you please of me. You remember the day I asked you what you thought of Harry Westacre, Edward?"

"I remember it well," said he, flushing a little.

"You told me a strange tale about Mr. Harry and Rob agreeing to toss up who should court me. I—my heart was sore, Edward, because you spoke so coldly, and never seemed to care about my being made little of."

"How could you think I didn't care?" he put in quickly.

"'Twas your own fault," she retorted, with spirit. "You might have seen my heart was bursting, and you never said a kind word. I ran out of the

house, and put the horse in the gig and drove away as hard as I could."

"I remember that, my dear," said Dr. May. "You were like a little fury that day."

"When I went home," continued Margery, "I thought and thought, and I fancied you had insulted me. And then grandma began telling me I was the talk of the place, and the only way to stop the gossip would be to get wed. So, thinks I to myself, 'I'll take the first man that comes; I'll take any man since no true man likes me.' And then I bethought me of Mr. Harry and Rob tossing up for me, and the notion came to me to serve them the same road. I reckoned 'twould vex Mr. Harry to be made even with Rob. And just at that moment in he came, smirking and smiling, and seeming so sure of me. I didn't wait to think about it—I just sent for Rob—and did it."

"Oh," returned the doctor, shaking his finger at her, "what a saucy wench! What a naughty, wilful hussy! I mind saying to myself that very day when I saw you—'If ever there was one who has bitten off her nose to spite her face, it's Margery Burchell.' But did you really and seriously, my dear, mean to marry Rob Rigby if luck were in his favour?"

"I meant it at the time," faltered Margery. "I—I wasn't in my right mind. Oh, Edward, forgive me!" she cried, with a burst of sobs. "'Tisn't seemly of me to say such things, but I must tell

all the truth. I loved you then, and I thought you didn't care for me, and so——"

"But when all was made clear between us, how came you never to tell me?" said he; his face had not relaxed, his arm was rigid in her grasp.

"I was so happy," she gasped.

She looked earnestly into his face, but finding no sign of softening there, withdrew her hands from his arm and hurried out of the room, sobbing all the way.

Dr. May, who had been fidgeting for the last moment or two, rubbing his nose, blinking, clasping and unclasping his hands, now burst forth—

"Well, of all the harsh, stony-hearted—— 'Pon my life, I'd make a better lover myself. Poor little sinner! 'Tis my belief *you* were most in fault, Edward. Had it not been for her wounded love she would never have committed this folly. Folly it was, nothing worse. Yet you must needs stand over her, like a judge ready to put on the black cap."

"Doctor!" cried Edward, with a groan, "you don't understand. This folly will have dreadful consequences. How can I look anything but grave when I must lose her?"

"Fiddlesticks!" cried the doctor. "You don't mean that you would give a serious thought to that mad promise of hers?"

"It was a promise, nevertheless," returned Edward. "She meant what she said. You know to me a promise is absolutely binding."

"Moonshine and midsummer madness!" cried Dr. May. "Do you mean to say that if a man vows he'll eat his head, if such and such a thing happens, he's bound to do it? Poor little Margery's vow to marry her servant is just as rash, and just as impossible to carry out. Pray, how long will you go on tilting at windmills, my dear Don Quixote—or was it Sancho Panza? I read the tale once, but, 'pon my life, I forget it now. Save on this one point, Edward, you are as sensible a fellow as ever I met with, but where this over-nice notion of honour comes in, faith, you are stark staring mad! The girl's scarcely more than a child for one thing,—would her father have dreamt of allowing the match, let her promise herself fifty times over? You know very well he wouldn't. Well, it is your duty, as her father's friend—even if you stood in no nearer relationship to herself—to prevent it by every means in your power."

A momentary expression of relief crossed Frith's face, and he looked earnestly at the doctor; then his countenance fell again.

He was beginning to speak, when his friend cut him short—

"Now look here, my good fellow, would it satisfy your insane scruples if Rigby were formally to renounce all claim to Margery's hand?"

"Why, of course it would satisfy me," returned the other, "but——"

"Then leave the matter to me," went on his

friend. "Put this silly affair completely out of your head—I'll get it straight for you. Call down your little sweetheart, and make it up with her, man, this very minute. Poor little loving lass, I doubt she's crying her eyes out in her room! Call her down and tell her the truth, that you are as much in fault as she, but that the whole thing is a storm in a teacup—be tender to her, mind!" cried the doctor threateningly.

Edward, who was already half-way to the door, turned round with a smile which reassured him.

"But what about Rob?" he queried, pausing with his hand on the latch.

"Leave Rob to me," said Dr. May. "I've a notion in my noddle. I think I know how to settle Master Rob."

Rigby was standing just inside the mill-door as the doctor passed, and greeted him with a sneer.

"Well," he said derisively, "I hope you've talked enough. What has it coom to, eh?"

"We have talked to some purpose, my friend," said Dr. May cheerfully. "The young folks have very wisely decided to leave the affair in my hands."—Here he paused, drawing his big, turnip-shaped watch from his fob, and consulting it gravely.—"I have one or two important calls to make, and then I must go home and dine; but about five this afternoon I shall be passing this way

again, Rob, and I will look in and settle the matter with you."

"*Yo'll* sattle the matter!" cried Rob angrily. "That's pratty cool. I'm to be patient till this arternoon, I suppose?"

"You are to wait till then," returned Dr. May; "patiently, if you are wise; impatiently, if you are foolish. But you'll have to wait."

CHAPTER XXVIII

"And she when love, scarce told, scarce hid,
Lent to her charm a livelier red,
When the half sigh her swelling breast,
Against the silken ribbon prest,
When her blue eyes their secret told,
Though shaded by her locks of gold."

ALL day long Miller Rob had gone about, as his subordinates complained, like a hen on a hot griddle. He had mounted once to the upper mill-chamber, whence he had a good view of the garden at the rear of the house, but had returned from thence in a worse humour even than before, for he had beheld Margery and Edward pacing up and down the prim, box-edged walks in very lover-like fashion.

The November dusk had fallen when the doctor's horse came leisurely into the yard, and the rider, dismounting and passing his arm through the reins, called loudly for Rob.

"I'm here," rejoined the latter sulkily as he came out.

"Why, it's dark," responded the doctor. "We must not talk about such a matter as this without lighting up to see each other's faces. Have you never a tinder-box, friend Rob?"

Even in the dusk he could see the other start, and without waiting for a reply he continued—

"Because I happen to have one here. I rather think you lost yours some time ago."

"Not as I'm aware on," came the answer, in rather unsteady tones.

"Oh yes, you did. It was that old brass one of John Burchell's, with 'Light come, light go,' on the cover. I know all about it, you see. I even know where you lost it and when."

"What would yo' be at, doctor?" growled Rob. "I'm not here to talk about tinder-boxes. When will Margery wed me? I want an answer to that."

"This is your answer," replied Dr. May, thrusting out his hand, in which some small object made of bright metal glimmered. "This is the tinder-box, Rob Rigby, which you lost on the moor the night you tied that rope across the path for the purpose of injuring Edward Frith. Never deny it, man—there's evidence enough to hang you; many a man has swung for less. You laid this ambush on a public path with the intent of doing grievous bodily harm to some individual. They may bring it in highway robbery, for aught I know," said the doctor, ruminating, "or they may bring it in conspiracy—but in any case it's a felony, and you'll be like to swing for it, good man. A woman was hanged last week for stealing a loaf of bread—there's

folks hanged every day for sheep-stealing—don't you reckon that you'll get off for such a crime as this if Edward Frith presses the matter. Edward can bear witness to the plot which he overheard you discussing with Harry Westacre; Tim, of the Red Dog, will bear witness to your brawling with him that night; I'll bear witness to Edward's broken leg, and to the tinder-box which I picked up on the spot, and to the rope tied in a sailor's knot, just as I have observed you have a fashion of tying knots, Master Rob—I saw you mending the rope attached to the pulley t'other day; and Margery Burchell can swear to the tinder-box. So altogether, Rob Rigby, I reckon we've got you."

"What are yo' bringing up this 'ere tale for now, doctor?" said Rob.

Dr. May had been too much excited to make use of the tinder-box in any other way than as evidence for the prosecution, but he could hear that Rob spoke huskily, and, even in the dusk, saw him furtively endeavouring to moisten his dry lips.

"You think it has no bearing upon the case?" he returned, with a laugh of triumph. "That's a little mistake, my friend; as I say, this tinder-box settles the question. If you don't at once withdraw all claim to Margery Burchell, I'll strike a light which will fire a train that will be very unpleasant for you, Mr. Rob. In fact it will blow you up sky-high!"

Rob made an uneasy movement, and the doctor continued pleasantly—

"But, Lord love you, man! I don't want to hang you—neither, I'm sure, does Edward Frith. All you've got to do is to confess you've no right to Margery Burchell's hand. Come, will you say the word?"

"Mester Westacre was in it jest so much as me," growled Rob.

"I daresay; but he was too wise to drop any of his property about, and I doubt if he could have tied that knot, Rob. Come, be sensible. Do you agree or do you not?"

"I agree," muttered Rob, after a moment's pause. Then he turned about and shambled off into the dark interior of the mill, where the doctor did not seek to follow him.

He betook himself to the house instead, and burst in jubilantly on the young folks, who, after the fashion of their kind, were enjoying "blind man's holiday" in the parlour, where a fire had been lighted in their honour.

"Well," he cried, tossing his hat upon the table, "all's well that ends well. You've lost a lover, Margery, my dear."

The two figures turned round eagerly.

"Oh, doctor, how did you manage?" cried Margery, clapping her hands.

"Why, I just showed him this tinder-box. By the way, I fancy you will recognise it, Margery. Did you not tell me Rob lost one some time ago? I picked this up upon the moor the day after Edward

broke his leg. I also discovered that the rope was tied in a very scientific knot which no goat could have been clever enough to twist it into."

"Do you mean to say——?" Edward was beginning, when Margery, more nimble-witted than he, interrupted him—

"It was Rob, it was that wicked Rob, who tied the rope on purpose to hurt Edward!"

"Mr. Harry Westacre, I believe, shared the honour of the exploit," said Dr. May. "You'll remember, Edward, telling them that you would lose no time in warning Margery here of their compact; they were determined to keep you quiet for a time at any rate."

"Oh," cried Margery, in an almost awestruck tone, "that was why Mr. Harry asked me if Edward had ever mentioned his name to me. I thought he feared that Edward would tell me of this plot against me, but I suppose his conscience pricked him for this business too. Oh, Edward, how can I ever be grateful enough that you have escaped his hands?"

"Well, now you have escaped Rob's too," chimed in the doctor. "Upon my word, for a little bird just fledged, you managed to get yourself into a pretty entanglement, Miss Margery. But you are free now——"

"No; caged," interrupted Margery quickly, "safely caged at last."

"Well, I'll not interrupt the billing and cooing,"

said the doctor. "There's your tinder-box, my lass. Keep it safe; it has proved useful. I'll e'en go and release Jerry, whom I left tied to the gatepost and very ill-satisfied."

"Ah, the poor, good beast," said Margery. "He has been worked very hard of late on my account."

"And what about the poor, good doctor?" retorted he. "Hasn't he been working hard, and don't you think he deserves a reward? Come, have you never a kiss to spare for an old friend, or does that greedy fellow yonder want them all?"

"I'll allow you to have one or two," said Edward; "that's to say, I lend them to you—they must be paid back with interest."

"What! am I to pay you back?" cried the old gentleman, after stooping to receive the touch of the girl's fresh lips. "Come along then. I vow you'll not forget that you've been paid, for I had no time to get shaved this morning."

He made a pretence of approaching Edward with arms outstretched, but dropped them before he had reached the young farmer, who stood laughingly awaiting him with a face of mock alarm.

"Am I not an old fool," he said, "and the lass here burning to get me out of the road? Nay, I'll leave you to collect your debts yourself, Master Edward. 'Tis waste of time to jest with the old man, isn't it? Don't waste any more time, lad—you've lost too much already. Get a'gate with your courting, and take my advice—hurry on the

wedding. There's many a slip 'twixt cup and lip, you know!"

He went out of the room laughing.

Margery turned towards Edward almost petulantly.

"I wish he wouldn't say such things," she cried. "Haven't we had slips enough already?"

"Nay, but he gave us very good advice," rejoined her lover. "The sooner we are married the better, my love."

Margery, who had been bending over the fire, turned towards him, poker in hand, the bright light playing upon her face and hair. She was smiling with a sort of tender shyness.

"I think so too," said she.

Edward stretched out his arm and drew her towards him, the poker falling clattering to the ground.

"Yes, indeed," he said, "the sooner we are married the better in every way. When I see how defenceless you are, and what advantage has been taken of you, I feel that I cannot rest until I have the right to protect you."

She turned her hand confidingly in his as a little child might have done.

"I thought to wait till the year of mourning was out, but yet I think my father would have wished us to get wed at once." Then—"No need for me to pretend that I am not willing," she continued; "I have been so tossed about, so forlorn—and, it's silly, but you mustn't scold me, until we are actually

man and wife I shall never get rid of the idea that *something* will yet come between us."

"Nay, but I will scold you for that," said he, and various lovers' blandishments ensued.

For a man who had had so little experience, Edward made a very creditable hand at his wooing; and as for Margery, though the affair with Harry Westacre might have been supposed to have initiated her into the procedure of courtship, she displayed an ignorance which Edward found extremely gratifying.

Mr. Harry had never been on such terms with her, she explained, he had been made to keep his distance. Edward would have to teach her how he would have her comport herself—what she must say—how she must look. Edward had no objection at all to teaching her, and between his instructions, and her response, the time flew so fast that they were both amazed when Mrs. Tickell, opening the door, announced that supper was ready.

CHAPTER XXIX

"I'VE towd the sarvent-folk they can have their mate in back-kitchen to-night," said Mrs. Tickell. "I reckoned yo'd as lief not have 'em all starin' at yo'. Eh, dear! I'm sure it's a coomfort to think thou'rt going to be sattled, Margery. Sich goin's on as there's been, an' so many ups an' downs here an' there. Set yo' down, do, Mester Frith."

"It will have to be Edward now," cried Margery; "he's going to be your grandson, you know."

"Dear o' me! An' a gradely grandson too! Ah, 'tis a strange notion that—my grandson. So you will—so you will. Well, an' if Mester Harry Westacre had wed yo', he'd ha' been my grandson, I reckon. That's a strange thing. I'd ha' been kin to the squire. Dear, to think o' that! Me as used to think it too much honour that Madam Westacre — that's his own grandmother — coom down our ways to buy a sittin' of eggs. She wer' awful fond o' poultry, Madam Westacre wer', an' she didn't have sich very good luck wi' 'em neither. Eh, well, to think as her grandson met ha' been my grandson."

"Don't let's talk of that now," said Margery. "You'd much rather have Edward, wouldn't you?"

Mrs. Tickell looked dubiously at the young man.

"I allus thought very well o' yo'," she remarked condescendingly, "but I dunnot seem to know so very mich on yo'—an' they say theer's foreigner's blood i' yo'r veins."

"Well, if there is, 'tis a long way back," said Edward, laughing, "and I'm not responsible for that."

"Nay, nay, I'm not sayin' as yo' are, but it's odd how the strain 'ull coom out. That black hair of yo'rs, now,—I never in all my days seen aught so mortal black,—an' yo'm getten blue eyes an' a pale face wi't. It scarce seems nat'ral. An' I doubt yo'r foreign blood 'ull break out other roads too. I've the feelin', Mester Frith, as a body never knows wheer to have yo'."

"Grandma, I do think it's unkind of you to talk like this, just when we've got things all straightened up at last and are all so happy."

"Nay, I can but say what I think, lass. I wer' allus one for sayin' what I thought. I'm sure I wish ye may be happy wi' Ed'ard Frith, but I can but rue as poor Mester Harry should ha' been packed off yon road arter his disapp'intment an' all. Humpy Jim of the Red Dog says he's left the country."

"And a good job too," cried Margery, with spirit. "There, grandma, let's leave Mr. Harry alone—I never want to think of him again—'tis like a nightmare. I want to think of nothing but happiness to-night."

"All very well to say sich things," grumbled Mrs. Tickell, "but 'tisn't so easy. How are yo' goin' to carry on the mill-wark wi'out Rob?—I reckon Rob's to get the bag."

"That's true," said Edward seriously. "You must give Rob notice at once. I don't like to think of him being about the place after what has passed. The sooner he goes the better; we must look out for a new man to take his place. We must get him settled before you come to me, sweetheart."

"Before you come to me, you mean," returned Margery, laughing; "though, for that matter, I suppose it is always the man who *takes* a wife, while the woman *gives* herself to her husband."

To her surprise he looked at her very gravely.

"Of course, but I meant what I said in every sense. I mean when you come to me at Moorside."

"But surely, Edward," cried Margery, starting up so as to face him, "you do not mean that I am to go to Moorside Farm to live? You know—I thought you always knew—that my husband must live here."

"*Must?*" cried he, rising in his turn. "Indeed,

I knew no such thing. My home is a poor place, Margery, but my wife must live there. You might have known me better than to suppose I would consent to come here as a hanger-on. No, thank God! poor as I am I've still a roof to my head, and land of my own under my feet. Such as they are you must share them with me!"

Margery turned pale with dismay; her eyes dilated, her lips parted. She was too much overcome to speak.

"Ah," he cried reproachfully, "are you so frightened of my tumble-down house? Had you never a penny it would have made no difference to me."

"Oh, Edward," she faltered brokenly, "how can you say such things?"

"Well," exclaimed Mrs. Tickell, who had hitherto been so much taken aback as to be unable to find voice, but who now spoke in shrill tones of indignant surprise, "that 'ud be a pretty notion. D'yo' mean to say yo' expect the lass to leave this coomfortable whoam, where she was born an' her feyther before her, to go trapesin' off to yon God-forsaken place o' yours? Yo' mun be daft!"

"Perhaps I was mad," he rejoined in a low voice. "I reckon 'tis too much to expect of any woman. Margery thinks like you—I can see that. Yes," he added, turning to her quickly, "'tis plain

to be seen that you hang back at the thought of coming to my home."

"But not because it is a poor one," she interrupted eagerly. "You ought to know that. I'd walk the world barefoot with you, Edward Frith. I'd care nothing if we'd never a roof to our heads at all. But I made a promise to my father on his dying bed."

"That's true," chimed in Mrs. Tickell. "The lass is speakin' naught but truth. She promised her feyther solemn as she'd never leave the owd place as long as she lived, and if she got wed, 'usband 'ud have to bide here too."

"How came you to make such a promise?" he cried quickly. "How could you promise for me—for any man? No man is to be bound without his own consent."

Margery gazed at him, unable to speak.

"Stuff and nonsense!" exclaimed Mrs. Tickell. "Other folks isn't so partic'lar. Mr. Westacre 'ud ha' been willin' enough to bide here—never made no objections at all, he didn't. 'Tis ill talkin' o' the dead, an' if yo' haven't a word to say in yo'r feyther's defence, Margery, I have. I say yo'r feyther was i' th' reet to mak' sure as his wishes should be respected at arter he wer' gone. 'Twas the one thing he thought on, as things should allus go on the same i' th' mill. 'I'll not ha' the mill forsook,' says he. 'Promise me as yo'll allus bide here.' And yo' gave him yo'r word."

"Yes," said Margery in a dull voice, "I gave him my word. I said, 'Father, I promise you as long as the sails of Burchell's Mill go round I'll stop here.' I took my oath on't."

"You promised for yourself and for the man you were to wed," said Edward slowly. "Did you think your future husband would have no self-respect? Was your father the only man in the world who clung to his home? Have I no feeling for mine, where my family lived for generations? I love every inch of the place, wretched and miserable as you think it."

"You shouldn't speak so unkind," said Margery, bursting into tears. "I'm sure I love the place too, for your sake. I'd go and live there joyfully as long as one stone stood above another—you know I would."

Mrs. Tickell now pushed back her chair, and rose majestically.

"Well, of all the heartless, ungrateful—my word, I'll bide to hear no more o' this. Never a thought for them as brought her up and was allus more nor a mother to her. Yo' think, no doubt, to drag me off to yon draughty, mouldy, tumble-down owd house, till I'd be bent double wi' rheumatics same as owd Molly. Never a bit o' consideration for yo'r grandma, or a notion o' axin' her advice afore yo' go promisin' this an' a-promisin' that, an' forgettin' the reet mak' o' promise as yo' made to yo'r poor feyther. Theer, sattle the thing among yo'rsel's;

I'll ha' naught to say to't, but yo' 'ull not get me to go a-trapesin' across the moor."

She flounced out of the room as she spoke, and Margery, who after the first bewildered glance at her had scarcely seemed to heed her words, turned once more to Edward.

"I'd be fain to go and live at your place," she repeated. "I love this house dearly, and the mill too, but if you bade me give 'em up I'd do it cheerfully for your sake."

Her little hand stole out to his arm and rested there timidly.

"I believe you would, my lass," he said more gently; "indeed I believe you would. I did very wrong to doubt you for an instant."

"But I can't go back on my word," urged Margery. "Edward, you who think so much of a promise, tell me if I can. Tell me, can I break my solemn oath to my dying father? You know I can't."

"Nay, I don't think you can," agreed he, after a moment's pause, in a low voice. "Ah, little lass, I doubt you were right—we'll be forced to part after all!"

"Now, Edward," she said earnestly, "you surely won't let this come between us? You spoke in heat just now, and didn't mean what you said. You talked of being a hanger-on here, when you know you would be master—absolute master of the whole place, and of me with it."

He caught her in his arms, and she thought he was yielding, and continued, with a note of tender triumph in her voice—

"Why, what nonsense my wise Edward has been talking! I have a little money, 'tis true, and the mill is mine, but then I am yours, and so everything is equal."

He caressed her in silence, but his face did not light up, and she went on very earnestly now—almost with a cry in her voice—

"Edward, there is nothing in the world that I wouldn't do for you if I had my will—sure you will make this sacrifice for me?"

For a moment she felt sure of victory; his face softened, and he seemed to waver. But presently he drew down her clinging arms and put her away from him, as if at the same time he put away the temptation to yield.

"No," he said, sharply and firmly, "there are some things a man can't do; I can't do this—I can't do this. It seemed hard enough to take a rich lass like you, dear as I love you. Yes, I'm not afraid to say this to you, because you understand. It did seem hard. If you had come to me I would have let you spend what you would in making my house a fit dwelling-place for you. You know me well enough to understand how much that would have cost me—all my life it has been my pride to think that I owe no man anything. For your sake I would have been beholden to you. But

on this point I can't give in. My wife must come to me—my home must also be her home."

"But when there is no way out of it," groaned she, "when I am bound? Oh, Edward, your pride is greater than your love! How shall we live without each other!"

"Don't you think I know how hard it will be?" he returned gloomily. "But I'd liefer live without love than without self-respect."

Her face was turned away, and he could not distinguish its expression, but the mere outline of the motionless figure standing a pace from him, with its hands folded on its breast, filled him, even as he spoke, with an agony of remorse.

Once again he had almost yielded, but that same power, stronger even than himself, seemed to hold him back.

"I can't!" he cried brokenly, and turning from her went slowly out of the room and out of the house.

CHAPTER XXX

"Ah me! how sweet is love itself possessed,
When but love's shadows are so rich in joy."

ROB RIGBY, alone in the mill, gave way, after the doctor's departure, to a very tempest of fury. He was enraged at the loss of his bride, at the thought of Edward's triumph, and of the gossiping tongues that would wag at his own expense; for Rob, secure, as he fancied, of his prize, had bragged openly that he would soon be master of Burchell's Mill.

"I doubt if they'll keep me now," he said to himself; "nay, I reckon I'll get the bag to-morrow. I'll not wait for it though—I'll walk out of the place this very night. I'll serve the little snicket out that road. She'll be put to for a bit to carry on the work wi'out me. But I'll march—I'll not stop here to be made a laughing-stock."

He sat still in the dark, swinging his long legs. He would emigrate perhaps; he had long wished to see the world, and had saved enough to be able to make a start in a new country. He felt a little uncomfortable at the remembrance of the threat which the doctor had held over his head. Perhaps

Farmer Frith would not be satisfied at his renunciation of all claims to Margery's hand, but would seek further vengeance on the man who had caused him such grievous bodily injury. Yes, it would be best to depart without waiting to see what his notions were on that point. Rob would walk to Liverpool that very night, and take his passage on a vessel bound for America. He would be very quiet about it though. Nobody should know his intentions. He would just slip away as soon as all was quiet, leaving no clue to his whereabouts. He groped about the now deserted mill, collecting various small items of property, and finding some satisfaction in the thought that no one understood the workings of the machinery as he did.

"She'll not find it so easy to get soombry for my place," he said to himself, with a chuckle. "'Twill sarve her right if this 'ere mill stops for a bit."

He tied up his bundle, leaving it handy by the door, for he did not wish to take it with him to his lodgings lest the sight of it might arouse suspicions. Then he went out very quietly, and betook himself homewards.

"Yo're late to-night, Mester Rigby," said the woman of the house where he lodged.

"I had summat to do up yon," he answered; "and I have to go out again, what's more. Don't yo' be nervous if I'm a bit late. Leave the door on the latch, and I'll be as quiet as I can."

She agreed, grumbling, and set his supper before him, lamenting that it had got spoiled with long waiting.

Rob disposed of the meal with all speed, and then going to his bedroom, drew out a brass-bound box from under his bed, and after hunting amongst its contents possessed himself of a canvas bag, which he placed in his bosom. It contained notes and gold to a considerable amount; like many of his class, he always preferred to keep his savings under his own eye.

Having ascertained that his landlady and her family had retired for the night, he changed his working suit for that of Sunday wear, packed a small bundle of necessaries, and sat down to wait.

When everything was absolutely quiet, he stole out, made his way cautiously along the lane and turned in at the mill gate. A light was still burning in Margery's window, and he drew back against the wall. It burnt long, for the poor child was sitting by her bed in a kind of trance of misery, lacking even the energy to undress. Meanwhile the moon rose, bringing out every object with pitiless clearness. Rob flattened himself against the wall, and mentally cursed Margery's wakefulness. As he looked about him, he descried that the parlour window was ajar, and, moreover, unshuttered, and more from some idle impulse than any definite motive, edged himself towards it and looked in. The fire was out, the

furniture threw uncanny shadows in the moonlight, but on the window-sill lay a small object, at sight of which his eyes kindled.

"'Tis that confounded tinder-box," he cried; "that blasted tinder-box as brought about my ill-luck."

Stretching out his hand, he grasped it, and somehow at the mere touch of it the thought which had been smouldering in his mind all the evening took definite shape.

"'T'ud sarve her reet if the warkin' o' the mill was stopped a bit longer nor she looks for. 'T'ud sarve her reet if the place was gutted out an' out. Among the empty barrels in yonder 'ud be a likely place for a fire to break out. The owd place is mostly made o' wood—'t'ud mak' a gradely blaze."

After all, who could prove that the fire did not happen by accident? He could arrange so that it should not break out too soon, and be far enough away by the time the alarm was given. The more he thought about it, the better he liked the idea. Flattening himself against the wall, he waited vengefully for Margery's light to go out.

At last the little glimmer disappeared, and Rob, after lingering some time longer with chattering teeth, for the cold was by this time intense, crossed the yard and entered the mill.

Once inside he set to work in earnest. Some empty sacks added to the barrels, and a few coils of rope, were materials for an excellent bonfire. Rob

took the precaution to darken the windows by dragging the heavy shutters across; not too soon must the mischief be discovered. He prepared a fuse carefully, with a piece of tarred rope, set it alight and crept out, locking the door after him. "Ha, ha!" he thought, looking up at the mill, "Mester Frith 'ull not be so well off as he thinks for. He'll find an empty shell where he looked for an egg."

Still looking up at the towering white building, with its great shadowy sails spread out like gigantic bat's wings, he shook his fist at it.

"Many's the weary hour I've worked in yo'," he cried under his breath. "Summer heat and winter cold yo' kept me toiling, curse yo'! But I've made an end of yo' at last."

. . . . . .

It wanted some hours of dawn when Edward awoke suddenly from the uneasy sleep into which he had fallen after long tossing and many vain efforts to stifle tormenting thought. His heart had spoken loudly in the silence of the night, but even its voice could not stifle that other voice to whose counsels he had ever proved faithful—the voice of Pride.

"You are wrong, you are wrong," cried Edward's heart; "you are sacrificing your love to a quibble—breaking Margery's heart for the merest whim."

"I am striving to do right," said Pride. And then the other voice would plead again, now echoing

the words of Dr. May: "'Tis a dastardly thing to let the lass eat her heart out because you are too high and mighty to do the straight thing;" now echoing the words of Margery herself: "You ought to know that I would walk the world barefoot with you, Edward Frith. I'd care nothing if we'd never a roof to our heads at all. . . . Surely you will make this sacrifice for me?"

There had been times that night when he had been almost on the point of deciding to make the sacrifice, but the very essence of his nature had seemed to rebel against it. It had seemed to him impossible—a thing to which he could not bend himself. He had stood as it were on the brink of an abyss, prepared to take the plunge, and at the last moment had held back.

"No, no," he had said to himself, "it cannot be; I would give my life for her, but I cannot forfeit my honour."

And now he awoke to the dull day—the day which would be lightened by no glimpse of her, cheered by none of her sweet words. For her sake as well as his they must keep apart.

As he dressed in very melancholy mood, by the dim light of his dip candle, one of his men came knocking at the door.

"Anything amiss?" cried Edward.

"Oh, maister, Burchell's is afire! They say the mill is burnt to the ground."

With an exclamation Edward threw open the

door; there stood the man, lantern in hand, his eyes goggling with horror.

"How did you hear this tale?" he cried, almost harshly.

"'Tis all over the country, maister. They say 'twas Rob Rigby as set the place on fire, and the folks is lookin' for him. Fire broke out soon arter midnight, and the whole village turned out."

Edward, without waiting to hear more, snatched the lantern from the fellow's hand and fled downstairs and out into the darkness.

Over the moor he ran, his heart beating violently, a cold sweat of anguish on his brow, straining his eyes vainly in the endeavour to peer through the gloom. It was now almost five o'clock, but the wintry dawn had not as yet given signs of lightening the inky blackness about him; his lantern threw but feeble rays, and he frequently stumbled in his haste.

All at once, as he rushed onwards, he descried another light coming towards him, a feeble, uncertain light, that wavered and sometimes disappeared, but came ever nearer and nearer.

At last he observed that it was carried by a small figure, which was advancing at a run. It came nearer, and he saw that it was a woman. Nearer yet, and behold! Margery's little face was all at once illuminated by the fitful glow.

If Edward had made speed before, he fairly flew now. When within arm's length, he tossed away his lantern and caught her to his heart.

"Thank God, you are safe!" he cried almost sobbingly. "Thank God, oh, thank God!"

"Oh, my dear," panted Margery, "the sails of Burchell's Mill will never go round again. Edward, I can come to you now!"

Then all at once something seemed to break within the man, and he sank upon his knees beside her.

"Nay, Margery, nay," he cried, "you shall not leave your old home—you shall not set your father's word at naught. It is I who will give way. We'll set the sails of Burchell's Mill going again, and I will come to you, my dear—not as the master, but as your most faithful servant."

. . . . . .

And so Margery's great love conquered, and henceforth all went merry as a marriage bell; indeed, the marriage bells were soon set a-ringing.

In course of time the young couple took up their abode at the mill-house, and the sails of Burchell's Mill, which was rebuilt on the old lines, might be seen for many a year after, sweeping round in the wind. Edward's farm was put in order and let for a term of years, until such time as his eldest son should be old enough to take possession of it.

Mr. Harry Westacre, finding that his talents were unappreciated in his own country, enlisted in a foreign regiment, and by a strange fate was put an end to by an English bullet.

Rob Rigby's intended vengeance not only brought

about the happiness of those he had intended to injure, but was the cause of his own undoing, for suspicion was quickly directed to him and he was arrested even before reaching Liverpool. He was tried, convicted, and ultimately transported to Botany Bay.

As for Dr. May, he took entire credit to himself for the happy course of events, and was given to speaking of himself playfully as "the Fairy Godmother" of Mr. and Mrs. Edward Frith; a title which he triumphantly sustained until the arrival on the scene of the future owner of Moorside Farm, when he joyfully surrendered it for that of godfather.

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